

Canyon Gold



Arthur Preston Hankins

Canyon Gold

By

Arthur Preston Hankins

Author of *"The Heritage of the Hills,"*
"The Jubilee Girl," etc.

An invigorating Western story of the type of which one never tires. It is always colorful, fast-moving—and as Mr. Hankins' many faithful readers have learned to expect—done with such wealth of detail and verisimilitude that the old days of the longhorns seem to live again.

Lin Columbia, prospector, desert wanderer, seeker of the dim trails, finds the motherlode—the real high-grade that every hard rock miner hopes to find. Naturally there are men ready to take it away from him. It becomes a factional fight. Men pound leather all day long to aid him, but in the end he is forced to rely on a girl—and she is the right sort of a girl, as game as any man who ever sat in a saddle.

If there is a spark within you that warms to life in the open, that thrills with the zest of things well done, that loves a fight against almost unbeatable odds, that frets at the dull routine of life in sheltered places and makes you long for a breath of pungent sage and the stirring whip of great horizons, you will be delighted with Canyon Gold.

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THIS BOOK

CANYON GOLD



A sudden, brisk challenge of hoofs, then: "Hands Up! Climb!" and six masked men rode down the trail.

CANYON GOLD

BY

ARTHUR PRESTON HANKINS

Author of "The Heritage of the Hills," "The Jubilee Girl," "The Valley of Arcana," "Cole of Spyglass Mountain"

FRONTISPIECE BY

CHARLES DURANT

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CHAPTER I.

LINNEUS COLUMBIA.

It was late in the afternoon of a mild spring day, when Linneus Columbia entered the Rector House and asked to be taken up to old Asa Dyer's room. He had ridden in the saddle forty miles since receiving Dyer's request to come to his deathbed.

Of medium height, rather heavy-set, and with a peculiar little habit of jouncing his head forward and looking upward at a person, Linneus Columbia was a well-known figure at Rectorville, on the fringe of the Mojave Desert. His eyes were bright blue and twinkling, his hair light and curly. The winds of the West had left their imprint on his neck and cheeks. His face at once struck one as that of a man who laughed at life, even when life seemed hardest.

Asa Dyer's gaunt features lighted up as Lin entered the miserable little room. Lin had known Asa for many years. He had at one time saved the old man's life when, heckled by a hilarious gang of border ruffians, Asa had lost his temper and started in to fight. The drunken gang would have made quick work of the aged prospector, but Linneus Columbia had stepped in in time to give the episode an entirely different climax.

Now Lin sat by the bed on which the gnarled old

pioneer lay dying, and received payment in full for the friendship that he had bestowed. He listened to a story of gold up near the headwaters of the Pipe-organ, a boisterous river of the north. He heard of rich float that Asa had discovered and of the sickness that had come upon him out there in the wilderness, rendering him unable to trace the float to the mother lode. Lin was given maps and detailed instructions and, above all, was warned to look out for Ozias Tyrone, of Tyrone Ranch, and the men who worked for him.

An hour later the old man passed beyond the desert horizon, with his knotty hand in Lin's.

Four weeks later Linneus Columbia was crossing Warhorse Valley to Temptation Pass, the gateway to the upper reaches of the Pipe-organ, driving three laden burros ahead of him. He made permanent camp that night in the broken forest land adjacent to the northern bend of the river.

Next morning he left camp and crossed the Pipe-organ a second time. Now, studying his map, he was easily able to spot Dragonfly, Whalebone, Marcasite and Vaulted Cañons.

This last deep depression, high-walled on either side by gaunt red rocks, snaked its way back from the Pipe-organ. Lin followed it for a half mile and then came to a halt. His map showed him that, about due west of the point where he stood, there was another deep earth scar called the Flytrap. Old Dyer had named it. It was a hidden cañon, cut off from the surrounding country by almost impenetrable chaparral. In this hidden cañon—the discovery of which caused Lin Columbia to marvel greatly—Asa Dyer had found the float.

After half an hour's efforts, Lin found a way to climb the steep western side of Vaulted Cañon. On the lip of it he found himself confronted by a seemingly endless

sea of chaparral, twelve feet in height, composed of gigantic manzanitas and prickly buckthorn, the branches locked and interlocked until they formed a forbidding mat.

But one could crawl under the locked branches and, after a little preparation, Lin started, holding his compass in his hand. He crawled for a quarter of a mile due west, during which time he gained no glimpse of the surrounding country. He found not even a deer path to direct his course.

But presently, puffing and sweltering from the terrific heat and the closeness of the chaparral, he crawled unexpectedly to the lip of another cañon that dropped straight down from before his very nose. If his eyes had been closed he would have plunged to his death on the jagged rocks below.

This hidden cañon, he presently discovered, had no outlet whatever. It was merely a deep sink in the heart of the chaparral thicket, shaped somewhat like the inside of a canoe. What water fell into it from the skies was disposed of by seepage, he imagined. It was less than a mile in length, extending northeast and southwest. It presented a strange formation, with the same reddish rock prevailing that he had seen in Vaulted Cañon.

That day he found the rich float and gloated over it. He remained in the Flytrap all night, and was early at work next morning, seeking for the mother lode. He was too old a hand at the game to be deceived when he found it three days later. It was high up above Flytrap, and he had cut his way slowly through the heavy chaparral with his ax. A frowning ledge of red quartz looked down upon him. He eagerly set to work.

He knew that the gold ledge before him was in close admixture with iron and copper pyrites and was invisible. In the case of the quartz float that he had

found at the foot of the hill, the rich metal could be plainly seen. Gold, however, undergoes no change from the action of the weather. The iron and copper sulphides had been washed out of the float rock centuries before, leaving the glittering prize to attract the eye of some frenzied treasure seeker. But such was not the case in the protected mother lode. He knew that the quartz before him was rich with the yellow metal. So he set about taking samples from which to make his test.

It was late the next afternoon when he finished his arduous task. The red sun was sinking beyond Cradle Cañon. With a sigh the blue-eyed man arose from his haunches.

"She'll run a hundred dollars to the ton," he told himself. "Guess I'll up-end a monument or two 'round here. Then I'll hie me to the land of the hamburger sandwich and the festive prune, and garner a few thousand numismatic tokens to put this thing across. You're a rich man, O Linneus, if the batterlike substance you call your brains can find a way to get this bunch of metallic goldenrods from the Pipe-organ to the U. S. mint."

Next morning he herded his three burros into line and started back on the long trail to civilization. But he ignored the advice of old Asa Dyer. Instead of traveling south, over the endless files of ridges and through the rugged cañons, he turned to the southeast after he had crossed the lower bend of the Pipe-organ.

To the east of him lay Tyrone Ranch, in Tyrone Valley, bounded by the Pipe-organ on the north and the Stranger on the south. He might find work at Tyrone Ranch, and he needed work. How could anybody there know that he had come into the Pipe-organ country and found the rich mother lode?

On entering the country, he had followed old Asa's

instructions to the letter. He had outfitted at Porcupine, a hundred miles or more to the south, and traveled to the Pipe-organ by way of the Avocet River and Brown Woman Pass, traversing Coonskin and Lodge-man's Valleys, and crossing the Stranger Mountains at the divide known as the Peddler's Crutch.

Thus he had left Tyrone Ranch far to the east of him. To make for civilization by the route that led through the ranch would save him fifty miles of weary travel. He was not afraid of any one at Tyrone Ranch.

Two days later a ragged chain of rocky hills threw the little cavalcade into the south. So precipitous were the frowning overhangs that it was not until the following day that the man found a way to turn to the east again. This was by means of a narrow pass in the range. On Dyer's map it was indicated as Cutthroat Pass.

"Humph!" remarked the genial Lin to his uncaring burros. "A frolicsome title, that. Cutthroat Pass, eh? Well, I wonder! My brain's got a fad for picturesque names like you find 'round here, but Cutthroat Pass is hoistin' it a little high for me." He ran his index finger from ear to ear and grinned.

Then he completed his tramp through the rocky pass and found himself looking down on an immense, partly level plain, with groves of trees here and there upon its bosom, and the Pipe-organ twinkling in the distance.

He removed his long telescope from the pack bag of his leading burro and laid it across the animal's pack. For a long time he studied smiling Tyrone Valley; and presently picked up a cluster of ranch houses in a grove of trees somewhere near the center.

"Tyrone Ranch," he advised the burro, which was reaching back and nibbling at one of the horn buttons on his canvas coat.

He replaced the glass, slapped the burro on the rump and started on.

"And Tyrone Ranch is only about ten miles from Cutthroat Pass. Let that tinker with your brain springs, O Linneus. Hot dog!"

CHAPTER II

JOYCE.

TYRONE RANCH was picturesque. Remote, beautifully wooded in places, fertile, expansive, it lay in this mothering cup of the mountains like a tropical island in the midst of troubled waters.

The strangest thing about Tyrone Ranch was that there was no road leading to it. There was only a bridle trail to connect it with the world outside, and this ran through weary miles of hot chaparral, through dense forests, around and about and down precipitous cañons, over stupendous mountains. To hack a road to Tyrone Valley would have taxed the resources of the wealthiest man in the State.

But Tyrone had everything that he wanted. Wagons and implements he had packed in a knocked-down condition to his remote ranch on the backs of mules and burros. His houses were built of logs from the virgin forest. His furniture was for the most part home made.

The country supplied his little clan with almost all that they required, and a trip to civilization was not necessary more than twice a year. And one of these semiannual pilgrimages occurred when the beef stock was driven out to market.

Originally, Ozias Tyrone had been a homesteader. He had also taken up timber claims, which, if the truth be told, were more valuable for grazing than for lumber products. The remainder of the surrounding

country was his simply because nobody else claimed it, which made a very satisfactory state of affairs for him.

He carried on general farming, for there were plenty of water and much fertility in the soil. He irrigated acres and acres of timothy and redtop for pasturage and winter hay. He raised corn for hogs and wheat for poultry.

He was, therefore, far different from the old time cattleman; but at that he grazed nine thousand head of Herefords from the foothills to the moderately high vegetation zones of the bleak Sierra. The path to the market was a long, grilling drive, but Ozias Tyrone prospered enormously.

The first man that Linneus Columbia met when he neared the picturesque ranch houses named himself Noah Littlejohn. He was a tall, stooped, gaunt-faced man with skim-milk eyes, the lashless lower lids of which sagged down and showed red creases.

His face, despite the sun and wind to which it was daily subjected, was chalkwhite. It had, also, a peeled look, like the skin over an old scar. His hair was of the color and stubborn straightness of hay.

He slouched from one of the stables at the sound of the burros' approach. He was dressed in the conventional cow-puncher garb, but cheaply and unfastidiously.

"Humph!" muttered the man behind the grunting burros. "A mail order cowboy. Chaps and hat from Chicago. Send no money—pay the postman if you're satisfied."

He lifted his voice: "Greetings, untraveled friend, calm dweller in a land of pure delight! Is this Tyrone Ranch and environs?"

"Sure is," replied the other in a cracked, hollow voice. "Where in blazes did ye drop from, pilgrim?"

"Cutthroat Pass," said Lin, seized by a devilish mood. "I have money—a little—courage—a little—and hunger a-plenty. I fain would dine and pass on my lonely way to the lower levels. Or, if persuaded, I'd take a job at Tyrone Ranch. They call me Lin Columbia. And you?"

"Noah Littlejohn," the man replied.

"Know-a-little John, eh?" Lin interpreted. "Well, John, don't be downcast, *amigo*. It's better to know a little than nothing at all, or as much as I do. Sometimes I'm persuaded that much learning hath made me mad."

"Funny, ain't ye! That's been sprung before. My handle is N-o-a-h Littlejohn. Don't make any mistake about that. I know a fresh guy when I see one, anyway."

"Meaning me? I beg your pardon. But the way you said it, John—Noah, I mean—Oh, let's forget it. The idea just sat down on my forehead, and I spoke before I said anything. Ask me somethin' more."

"What d'ye follow?" dutifully wheezed the man in chaps.

"Health and wealth," replied Columbia. "I caught up with health in the first three yaps after I opened my eyes. I've been chasin' wealth ever since."

"Can ye punch cows?"

"Cows and time-clocks. I'm a citizen of the great open spaces, a child of the boundless West. I can ride, rope, jot down memoranda on the quivering skin of a calf, mine, prospect, build railroads, sing, eat, loaf and smile on occasion. My farthings have departed from me. I would work that I may eat."

"You hate yourself, don't ye?" sneered the other.

"On the contrary, I am highly pleased with myself," retorted Lin.

"Been prospectin'?"

"Sure." There was small use to deny it with such an outfit as the shaggy burros packed.

"Ye can't be much of a cowhand, then. Ye look like a sourdough to me."

"Feed me and try me, if you need another unit in this hectic organization. If not, feed me anyhow, and I'll be on my way. But you'll be makin' a great mistake. One of the best things I do is everything."

The ghost-faced man pondered. "We don't see a stranger up in here once a year," he said at last. "Where'd ye drift from?"

"Back there." Lin pointed indefinitely toward the Peddler's Crutch.

The man's red-lidded optics studied him gloomily. They reminded the wayfarer of the eyes of an aged Cuban bloodhound.

"I'll see th' boss," he said at last. "We could use another hand. But if ye can't do th' work—"

"I'm a child of the West," Lin reiterated. "Put leather under me. I got a fad for saddlestock. I need the wampum. I won't stick long, though. Just want a grub stake for down below. Something to jingle in my pocket when I blow in, you savvy. A nest egg—a stack o' blues."

"Where'd ye ride last, ole sure-fire?"

"Thanks," returned Lin lightly. "My monniker, all right. Why, miles and miles from here—about seven hundred of 'em."

The man of gloom looked him over from head to feet once more, sneered and turned toward the main ranch house.

"I'll see th' boss," he stated again. "We got pigs to feed and young corn that was washed loose to be replanted. Good job for a child o' th' boundless West."

Ten minutes later Lin Columbia was grinning good-naturedly into the scowling face of Ozias Tyrone, lord

of Tyrone Valley and of all the country between the Pipe-organ and the Stranger.

Tyrone was tall, and straight as a black-oak sapling. His skin was swarthy as a Mexican's; the lower part of his face was hidden by an immense beard as black as a stormy night. His hair was black, his eyes were black and piercing. His immense shoulders were Atlas-like, and his waist was tapering and narrow.

"A graceful canvas," Lin mused as the great, dark man came swinging toward him. "Cutthroat Pass, I believe, was the name o' that chute up there. I wonder why? Guess I'd better limit the power for good of a couple o' pounds o' grub and fidget myself on down the line.

"Who comes here seems to be a two-gun tragedian, from the amount of hardware he fudges along. This gent and old Swivel-eye are a fine dish of goulash. I don't pick up a penchant for either of these disciples, somehow. I wish I'd minded mamma and stayed at home!"

The big man came to a pause before him, great fists hipped just above the wooden butts of his two big guns. A tenderfoot would have quailed before the piercing look that he bestowed on Lin Columbia.

"What d'ye call yerself, neighbor?" he demanded in a booming voice.

Lin ducked his head forward and peered up at him. "Linneus Columbia, child of the West," was his prompt reply. He had started in by "kidding" the man called Noah Littlejohn, and it seemed now that he could not stop. He realized that it was a bit dangerous to be flippant to this dark man of the mountains, but he could not help it. Linneus Columbia was Linneus Columbia on all occasions.

"What's this here 'child o' th' West' business?" the gigantic man wanted to know.

"It's just a little trophy that I hung in my collection o' fads some years ago," Lin replied.

"I don't savvy," said the black man, puckering his brow.

"I don't doubt that," Lin assured him. "But don't mind me. I've heard I'm crazy."

"I reckon ye are," decided Tyrone, with a deeper scowl. "Well, ye better have some grub and be movin' on. We ain't got no place for funny folks round here. Where did ye come from, anyway?"

"Up in there." Lin waved his hand toward the eternal mountains.

"Have any luck?" Tyrone glanced at the gold pans hanging from the packsaddle of one of the burros.

"Not much. Gophered around a little. Found a stone hatchet or two and a couple of Indian arrowheads. Some color. Then my brain became fagged, and I wanted a change."

"Ye're mighty cheerful about it."

"Always cheerful, *señor!*"

Again the dark eyes coasted over the dusty burros, the earth-colored packs, the gold pans.

"Come on and eat," invited Tyrone, resting his inscrutable black eyes on the pilgrim again. "Maybe I c'n rake up work fer ye."

"But I thought you didn't want any funny folks around here," grinned the blue-eyed traveler.

"We'll see. Unpack th' burros and feed 'em, Noah. Come on to th' house, you. I'll have grub raked up for ye."

Lin followed meekly in the big man's steps. Just within the door of the big log house he came to a pause—a hesitating, mystified pause—for he found himself looking into the steady hazel eyes of the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

"Joyce," said Tyrone, "this here's a gentleman that's on the outside trail and stopped for grub. Throw somethin' into him, will ye? This here's my step-daughter, Joyce. Mr.—er—Columbus—Joyce Larue. She'll feed ye, son."

The girl stepped forward, graceful as a fawn. Her wavy brown hair rippled down her back, tied at the nape of her neck with a bright-red ribbon. Her eyes were friendly and sincere, her features so nearly perfect that Lin drew in his breath in sudden amazement—and alarm. For Lin Columbia had never loved a woman, and the unexpected, stupefying beauty of this wilderness girl set his brain awirl.

"Columbia," he managed to say—"not Columbus. I—I never discovered anything—but you. Oh, gosh! I didn't mean to say that, Miss Larue! I—I didn't aim to pitch a ringer the first time I crooked my arm!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SHADOW AT THE WINDOW.

THE kitchen into which the girl of the mountains conducted the guest of Tyrone Ranch was an immense room, well lighted, despite the dark hue of its smooth log walls. A middle-aged woman with coal-black hair was seated near a window, knitting. She had a tired look in her dark eyes, and her hands were workworn. The girl's introduction of Lin Columbia to her brought out the information that this was her mother, the wife of Ozias Tyrone.

She appeared rather bashful and had little to say after the presentation. Lin detected a quaint, not unpleasing inflection in her speech. Not for nothing had he traveled through the West; he recognized the musical intonation of Latin-America.

Joyce asked her guest many friendly and innocent questions in regard to his wanderings while she prepared something for him to eat. Lin sat in a straight-backed, thong-bottom chair and watched her when her back was turned. He was still amazed and somewhat panicky.

She suddenly ceased her work over the glossy range and stepped to a window behind his back. For a little she looked out toward the stables and the corrals. Then, casting an odd, hurried glance at the pilgrim, she hastened back to her work.

Her mother arose presently and looked at a yellow-faced clock. Muttering something about "the chickens," she put her knitting down and left the room.

Then the daughter carried what she had been preparing to the table and set it before the wanderer.

"I hope you like Mexican cooking," she said, with a smile. "We're fond of it here; and it happens just now that everything already cooked up is highly seasoned. Mother and I are *mestizos*. Perhaps you've guessed."

"Yes," Lin replied; "I got that from your mother's first words. But you are—there's more white blood in you, I think."

"Yes; my father was pure French. I'm something of a throwback to his people, I guess. Even at that, there's more *gachupine* in me than Indian. Do you know what *gachupine* means?"

"Oh, sure. I've made Mexico several times on my planetary rounds. That's the *mestizo* name for a Spaniard."

"Good! We're far from the line. I like to meet some one way up here who knows my country."

She ceased speaking and caught his eye. For a moment she seemed to hesitate, then said something quite unexpected.

"Do you care to have people nosing through your pack bags, Mr. Columbia?"

Lin blinked his blue eyes, for the moment taken by surprise. But he looked at her intently, and thought that he understood.

"Well, no, now," he drawled. "Why? Is that a fad around this place?"

"It's being done right now," she answered. "I thought I'd let you know, so that you will understand how to conduct yourself."

"I'm mighty thankful," said Lin, more amazed than

ever at this girl. "I get it that you don't—er—just approve of what is being done."

"I don't!"—red lips tight and firm.

"Good! We're gonta make a pair of wonderful little cellmates. Wanta tell me any more—just for a starter?"

"Do you know an old man named Asa Dyer?"

"I was once his besetting sin," said Lin.

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"I was his fellow orphan. He loved me. He thought more of me than anything alive. Therefore, I was his besetting sin. It's easy to get a line on my concordance, Miss Joyce, if you listen closely and usher what I have to say into your curriculum."

Joyce Larue smiled amusedly. "You're whimsical, to say the least," she said.

"I'm a mighty poor synopsis at best," he told her. "But don't mind me. Did you know old Dyer?"

"He isn't dead?"

Lin ducked his head forward, looked up into her eyes, and nodded solemnly.

"Oh, I knew he wouldn't last when he left here! Tell me about it, won't you?"

"Well—perhaps later," he half promised. "Just now, if you'll pardon me, I'm mighty interested in what you had to say regardin' pack bags."

She glanced about the room, at both doors, before replying. When she spoke her voice was low.

"They knew," she said, "that Asa Dyer found gold up beyond the Peddler's Crutch. They were waiting for him to come back, when they meant to follow him and—well, benefit themselves, of course. He didn't come within the time that he had said he would return. Then you show up. They know he was a mighty sick man when he trailed through Tyrone Ranch. They hardly expected him to live. They think that he is so

sick he had to send you, or that he is dead and you know his secret. That's plain enough, isn't it?"

"Crooked—these *hombres* 'round here?"

"To the last man. My stepfather is the worst of all of them. I'd leave the ranch to-morrow if it weren't for mother. She won't divorce him. I must stick by her. But I'm working against this gang whenever I find the opportunity."

Lin Columbia thoughtfully ate his *frijoles* and *co-cales* and sipped the strong drip coffee.

"Gang, you called 'em," he said at last.

"Yes, I did. But I have nothing to say about that right now. I just wanted you to know that your pack bags were being investigated."

He nodded. "I savvy," he told her. "Thanks."

He ate in silence for a time, then looked up at her with his innocent blue eyes.

"I like you," he brazenly announced. "We're gonta be great pals, if I have anything to say about the matter. Some time you're gonta tell me all about yourself. We'll swap histories. Meantime I'm trusting you like I would a sister. You make me want to do that. Then listen, Sister Joyce: they won't feast their eyes on any scintillating trophies in my pack bags. Just why? Looky-here!"

One at a time he tossed on the table before her three large samples of quartz. They seized the light from the window and blazed with virgin gold. Joyce Larue caught her breath and took a quick step to examine them.

"Twenty grief-stoppers in those three little lumps, if there's a dime," he informed her. "I don't carry my samples in my pack."

"My goodness gracious! Is it as rich as that?"

"In places. Old Dyer found a fortune up there, and died before he could realize on it. It's mine now.

He gave it to me on his deathbed. I wanta work here a time, and then I'm goin' down below and—well, try to start something, you know. I wish they'd found some o' this rich quartz in the bags. Then your step-father sure would take me on. He'd want me near him, you see, so he could keep tab on me. He doesn't seem to want to hire me any too well. So I think I'll—"

A shadow passed the window behind Lin's chair. Joyce Larue drew in her breath quickly and took a swift step to place herself between the glittering samples and the light that streamed upon them. But suddenly Lin threw out a hand and stopped her progress.

"Stop!" he whispered. "Let 'em see it. Don't look. Talk to me."

She instantly understood his tactics, and began speaking rapidly, looking straight into his face. Once more the shadow faintly diluted the light of the sun. Out of the corners of her eyes Joyce risked a glance. Softly she spoke to Lin.

"Noah Littlejohn," she said. "He passed twice. He saw the gold. His eyes told me that he had seen. Now what?"

"Perfectly all right," Lin assured her. "That's what I wanted. My saddle's in Frisco. I want to stay here and work for enough money to get it and take myself to Selden for the big rodeo in June. There I'm gonta ride into first money in the bucking-horse performances. If I do, I'll earn enough to put me back above the Peddler's Crutch and do my assessment work on my claims."

"Do you ride buckers?"

"When they don't ride me. I do about everything that's ever been done in the outdoor West, from ridin' freights to holdin' the portfolio of jerkline skinner in a loggin' camp. Next June I'll ride in the bucking contest at Selden for the championship o' the world."

"My! I hope you win."

"Well, she's a tolerable expansive contract, but there's nothing like steppin' aboard for a try."

"Depend upon it," she warned him, "that Ozias Tyronne will be watching for you when you come back on your way to the Peddler's Crutch."

"I won't pass through here," he told her. "Asa Dyer warned me to swing wide about this rancho, but I wouldn't listen. No matter, though. I'll go in from Porcupine and that way I'll dodge 'em."

"Have you ever ridden in a rodeo before?" she asked, after a thoughtful pause.

"Never in much of a one, Miss Joyce. Mostly range ridin'. But I'm a stickin' fool—if you don't mind my unfurlin' so much verbosity. I broke 'em for the army durin' the war. Incidentally they broke three ribs, one collar bone, and one breast bone for me, but I'm hangin' together yet, in places.

"I had my eye on the Selden celebration when I drifted up through the Peddler's Crutch, following old Asa's instructions. So I shipped my leather flapjack to Frisco when I lit out from that old sand-spread they call the Mojave Desert. I says to myself: 'If you can ride Shocking John into first money, Linneus, you can gather enough goldenrods to put this thing across. And if you can't, you can't.' Which is fairly simple arithmetic for a child of the boundless West. So me for the shimmying back of Shocking John next June."

"Is Shocking John an outlaw?" asked the girl. "I've been to several big rodeos and know about most of the bad buckers—Long Tom, Cyclone, Casey Jones, and many more. But I've never heard of Shocking John."

"Neither did I until recently," said Lin. "He's a new one in the frolic. A wild horse. Never been in a rodeo yet. Montana stock. Nobody's ever stayed on him ten seconds. The tale is that Shocking John has

got everything in rodeos skinned to the bones. His owner wants to sell him for a rodeo buckler up in Pendleton. He wants a fancy price. He wants to convince riders that there's no horse on four legs like Shocking John. So he's added a thousand dollars in cash to the seven hundred and fifty saddle the Selden people will put up for the winning rider. Stick twenty seconds and those thousand goldenrods are mine. Then, hitchety-hatchety, up I go through the Peddler's Crutch—to wealth and fame! Let 'er buck!"

CHAPTER IV

CORN PLANTER TO BUCKAROO

NOAH LITTLEJOHN met Lin Columbia as he reached the stables after his engrossing talk with the daughter of the rancho.

"Well, John," said the irrepressible traveler to the man with the bloodhound eyes, "what's the verdict of the coroner's jury? Do I work or walk?"

"Before we go any further," Littlejohn retorted, "I want ye to understand that my name ain't John. She's Noah. Noah Littlejohn. And I'm boss 'round here, outside o' Tyrone. Get that?"

"My intellect has toddled to the fact, brother," Linn replied. "All due respect to you from me. Now speak."

"If ye wanta try yer hand at resettin' young corn an' doin' general chores 'round th' ranch till th' spring drive is on, hop to it."

"At?"

"Forty and, the boss said."

"To the middle of May makes forty; to the middle of June makes forty more. Forty plus forty is eighty. I'm on, old cow nurse. When do I begin?"

"Right now."

"My burros?"

"You c'n turn 'em loose to graze, can't ye?"

"That'll satisfy 'em. Lead me to the festive corn-field, Jo—Mr. Littlejohn."

The cornfield was on the gentle slopes of a warm little valley, ten minutes' walk from the stables. The late spring rains had badly washed the four-inch shoots, but they were clinging by exposed roots. It was Linneus Columbia's present task to straighten them and settle them back in place by recovering and patting soil over the roots.

It was a back-breaking job, and the chances are that Lin would have hesitated over attempting it had it not been for the girl in the ranch house. Every time he thought of her beauty, which was about all of the time, it worked havoc with his mental equilibrium.

His labor with the young corn occupied him severely for a week, during which time he met three more of the cowhands who drifted in from time to time. These were Bud Mohawk, Curly MacMahon and Booky Peters. They rode from the winter grazing ground far down below the foot-hills.

Lin did not like the looks of any of the three, but most of all he watched and studied Noah Littlejohn. Here, he knew, was a man to be feared.

He saw little of the girl. He spoke to her when he and Noah went into the kitchen for meals, summoned there by loud blasts on a long steer's horn that hung beside the door. He, Noah, and the family were the only ones permanently living at the home ranch now. Joyce always smiled at him and dropped her glance—not in embarrassment, it seemed, but by reason of the secret that they held between them. Lin slept in the big bunk house with Noah, and they had little enough to say to each other.

The corn was all replanted now, and Lin found himself doing odd jobs about the ranch. He even cut firewood, milked cows, and plowed ditches for the coming summer's irrigation scheme. There was plenty to do, and the days passed swiftly. But he longed to feel

a horse between his legs again before he went to the rodeo in June.

Then one night Noah Littlejohn became more communicative in the bunk house.

"C'n ye really fork a horse, Columbia?" was his opening sentence.

"Son," Lin replied, "when you've glided from the mezzanine floor or as many bad ones as I have, you can call yourself a regular longhorn secretary."

"Why can't ye ever talk sense?" snapped the *vaquero*.

"I don't know," Lin told him. "Just born foolish, I reckon. But you were speakin' about ridin'. You don't mean to put me at the tender mercy of any of these old hay-presses you got on this *hacienda*, do you? Where did you take on such a whim?"

"We got some good stock," Littlejohn maintained, his reddish eyes resentful. "But if ye don't see nothin' about here that looks brisk enough for ye when we ride down for th' drive, ye c'n throw the rope over one that's out in th' hills and break 'im to suit ye." Noah Littlejohn sneered sarcastically as he said this.

"When do we chinkfoot it down there, old cow apostle?"

"Week from now. Ketch up yer horse to-morrow, if ye wanta. There's a wild one ramblin' with th' bunch. Big bay with silver stockin's and a silver snip on his nose. He'd make a mighty keen cow horse, I'm thinkin', if he was busted. I'd like to see ye on 'im."

"What d'ye say, then, that I catch up one of these old things around here and ride out after him to-morrow mornin'?"

"Shoot yerself."

So early next morning Noah Littlejohn watched, with grudging approval, the neat loop that Lin laid about the neck of one of the horses in the corral;

sneered as he observed Lin's expert handling of the half wild animal as he saddled him; made his face uglier than it was as he pretended to discount Lin's riding when, once aboard, the uncurried colt treated him to a rocking horse jolting by no means amateurish.

"Oh, I guess ye've been on' em before," he admitted, as horse and rider dashed through the corral gate, the colt still bucking furiously.

"Thanks for thy praise, old totem pole!" shouted Lin as he swung the buckler to the north to ride some sense into him.

"Now, looky here, you old petrified giraffe," he said to the horse, as the bucking continued, "you're not gonta nudge me for a bust, and the sooner you slip this turmoil the more fun we'll have. To you I hold forth this impassioned speech: Before you succeed in thickening the air with me you'll be old and gray and sorrowful. Horse, be kind!

"I'm speakin' to you in your mother tongue now. Be kind and playful, but not so intent on pluggin' the cavities in my teeth with sand. Oh, well—proceed! Let me in for an airplane tour. Nick me for a trip to Mars. Hand me the ooze dive. Percolate! Shimmy! Fidget me elsewhere! Butter the desert with my face!

"Oh, gettin' enough of it, eh? Kinda limitin' your capacity for cussedness, am I? Well, just chisel this on your grandfather's gravestone: I'm the champion cow expert of this glorious State; and a month from now I'm gonta be the champion bovine chorus girl of the world! Go to press with that and be content."

The foregoing harangue, in a soothing, monotonous voice, gradually convinced the colt that the man on his back was a friend. Besides, the running buckler was tiring fast; so now he gave up pitching altogether and tried to run away. In time the man astride him talked him out of this; and they were jogging peacefully along

at the cow-pony trot before the stables were out of sight.

"There! That's better! Now isn't this nice—this sudden brotherly love between us, horse? That's right—slant back your ear so what I have to say will adhere to your mental flypaper. I like you, horse, and you like me."

He patted the streaming neck, crooned in the furry ear—and horse and man were friends.

Lin found the band of horses two hours later in a little cuplike valley, warm and green with grass. He maneuvered until he had cut out the magnificent snip-nose; and as he forced him from the others his lariat sang above his head. There was a sudden turn, a frantic scramble as the bay tried to elude the trap that Lin had set for him. But in that instant Lin forefooted him, and he hit the ground with a thud.

Later a fierce battle ensued when Lin attempted to lead his prize to the corrals. He squatted and reared and plunged, but the lariat held him until gradually he followed, with more or less meekness, lifting his beautiful head to nicker back at the remainder of the band.

"I guess ye're somethin' of a wrangler, after all," admitted Littlejohn, as Lin rode into the corral with the struggling bay.

"Thank ye kindly," Lin replied. "You and Mr. Tyrone might have gone with me, you know, and helped me herd the whole band in. I knew I was getting the worst of it, but I didn't squawk. Now get your snubbing horse, if you've got one, and we'll saddle this rubber monument and ride."

"We'll see," said Littlejohn.

Lin swung to the ground, dropped the reins and gradually, hand over hand, shortened the distance between himself and the trembling bay. Out of the cor-

ners of his eyes he saw, standing on the veranda of the ranch house, Ozias Tyrone and Joyce Larue watching proceedings in the corral.

"Horse," said Lin to the wild-eyed bay, "you may picket me to the clouds, but I don't believe it's in you. I'm studyin' you, horse. Don't tinker with my springs too hard, for I'm out of practice. And Sister Joyce is watchin' from the stoop. I've got to ride you after all the chaff I've cast upon the winds. So weave this into a poem: To-day I'm gonta ride you to a finish and let no daylight show, or I'll never dodge the ruts between here and Selden for that tête-à-tête with Shocking John."

Then came Noah Littlejohn with the snubbing horse, and Ozias Tyrone and his stepdaughter started walking toward the corral.

CHAPTER V

PUNISHMENT

THE pretty Joyce Larue climbed the corral fence and perched herself thereon to watch Lin Columbia ride the "bad one." Her stepfather, Ozias Tyrone, came through the gate to help Noah Littlejohn with the saddling. Lin, as he looked carefully at his cinch, saw the two men exchange knowing winks, and suppressed laughter lurked in their eyes.

"Oh!" Lin muttered. "Just like that, plumb cultus, eh? But I'll get his street address while they're gettin' him ready for the parade. I gotta ride this old duster or forever hold my peace."

The ranch owner had taken the lariat from Lin's hands and was trying to quiet the wild horse. The snip-nose bay, however, showed little inclination to stir up a preliminary mess. He was quiet, and, except for an occasional suspicious snort, seemed as amiable as an old plow horse. But Lin Columbia was not deceived by this. He saw the fire in the dark eyes of the buckner, saw plenty of white displayed. He realized that there was trouble ahead.

Ozias led the animal close to the snubbing horse. Though he tossed up his head and forestruck once, it was not a difficult matter for Noah and his boss to get the halter on him. They reeved the snubbing rope through the halter ring. Then, with the rope in hand, Littlejohn mounted the snubbing horse. He hauled

home the snubbing rope gradually. When the head of the wild one was close to the saddle horn he took a couple of turns. Then, deftly, Ozias Tyrone worked a gunnysack up under the halter straps to blind the bay.

Softly, with no unnecessary noise or flourishes, Ozias set the saddle on his back, cinched up. The horse had stood without a move. Again Lin saw Littlejohn wink at his employer.

Without a word the two men looked at the prospective rider. Everything was in readiness. It was up to him.

Lin stepped forward, gave everything the once-over and took the halter rope from Noah's hand. With his left hand he turned the nearside stirrup a trifle outward, set his foot in it. He rose easily from the ground, light as a feather. The saddle had scarcely moved in his mounting. He settled himself in his seat, thrust both feet into the stirrups to the heels.

"Let's investigate his method of attack," he said.

Ozias pulled the gunnysack from the horse's head and stepped quickly aside. Noah loosed the snubbing rope.

There was an instant's pause, while the big bay stood like a statue. Then over his body ran a shudder. In the flick of an eyelash he was standing as straight as a barber pole. A quivering flash of time, and he lunged forward in a great horseshoe leap, landing with all four feet together.

It seemed that the entire world had exploded and bulged up under Lin Columbia. The shock of that first leap seemed to drive the saddle entirely through him and snap his backbone off at the middle. Before he could recover from the terrific shock another one struck him in the same place.

Then the big bay twisted entirely around and stood on his hind feet for another lunge into nothingness.

But Lin was ready for him this time. So far, he knew his fighting tactics. The terrible crash to the ground did not shock him so thoroughly when it occurred the third time.

Then the buckner ran a dozen steps, sunfished—throwing his big rump to the left as he rose in the air with all four feet high above the earth, twisting himself like an eel.

He landed, legs spread. He shook his head, rose again, sunfished to the right.

“Horse,” breathed Lin Columbia, “you sure got a lot o’ stuff.”

“Fan ’im!” came jeeringly from Noah Littlejohn.

Lin jerked off his hat and began fanning the bay as he skyscraped again and came down for another of those terrific jars.

“Rake ’im, cowboy!” yelled Ozias Tyrone. “Ye’re ridin’! Rake ’im!”

But Lin did not attempt to rake his rowels from withers to rump to infuriate the horse and make him buck the harder. To be quite frank, he knew that he had all he wanted to handle, considering the length of time that he had been out of the saddle. This was practice for him. He wanted to get back into his old form.

His head was spinning as it was. There was a painful little ache in his right side, where the buckner in Montana had broken three ribs for him. These ribs had long since healed and had not hurt him during his riding on the Mojave Desert. But now that he had been afoot so long, it seemed that they pained him more than they had directly after the knitting.

But this was no time to think of pain. The snip-nose had resorted to his first tactics again to shake this two-legged encumbrance from his back. Though he knew several tricks of the professional buckner’s art,

his long suit was skyscraping—standing erect and threatening to pitch backward with his rider.

But he would change his plan when at the height of his climb and lunge forward through the air, to land with all four feet together with a jolt so shocking that his rider would think his backbone had surely been driven up into his head. He did not attempt so much to throw his man as he did to punish him thoroughly for his effrontery in mounting him—to make him long to be thrown in order to end the killing ordeal.

“Scratch ’im, cowboy!” yelled Ozias again.

But Lin did not scratch him. He knew when he had enough. He told himself that he would scratch him, though, after a day or two, and make the fur fly. He knew better than to jeopardize his future plans by going too far in his untrained condition.

Up, down! Up, down! Up, down! It seemed as if some giant were spanking the harassed buckaroo with a club that was two feet thick. His eyes were glazed. Blood was streaming from his nostrils. In his ears was a terrific roaring as of speeding trains hammering past him. And that terrible pain in his side continued to pester him. He was almost half blind, and gasping for breath. And still the bay continued to rise and descend in his punishing inquisition.

Then came a shrill cry from the fence: “Ride ’im, cowboy!”

Lin thrilled. The bay began to run. Round and round the corral he raced. Lin had time to breathe, to take stock of his aches and pains, to realize once more that the sun was shining and that the earth was not all pounding machinery into which he had been cast.

“Open the gate!” he shouted; and as Ozias complied the big bay darted through. Out across the mesa they thundered, the horse lifting himself occasionally, but feebly. He slowed, stopped suddenly, and hung his

head. In that instant Lin dismounted and started leading him back toward the corral.

He had ridden the horse until he ceased bucking and tried to run from the menace on his back, but he had not scratched him—had not goaded him to do his worst. But the bay was whipped, and his downcast air admitted it.

Ozias Tyrone and Noah Littlejohn were silent as he led the heaving animal into the corral. Their faces showed chagrin, resentment. But there rang in Lin's ears a sudden burst of smart sounds, and he realized that Joyce Larue was clapping her hands. Her stepfather swung about and gazed at her sternly, but she lifted her voice and called: "Good work, *amigo!* Save some of that for Shocking John!"

Ozias swung back to the victor.

"I reckon ye c'n ride," he admitted. "I'm willin' to confess ye're th' only man that's ever stayed on his back that long. Most of 'em slide off backward when he stands up and gives 'em th' chance, pretendin' he got 'em unawares. We call 'im Punishment."

"He's a ravin' fool," was all that Lin Columbia said as he offsaddled the bay, "but I wanta ride him in the drive."

"Hop to it!" invited Ozias.

CHAPTER VI

"GOOD-BY!"

By gradual degrees Lin Columbia broke the snip-nose bay with the silver stockings, mastered him. But he had not scratched him once. He had taken a liking to the horse, and wanted him for a friend who would help him in his work while he remained at Tyrone Ranch. Slowly he became amenable, took a liking for his rider. Then Lin trained him, and when they were ready to ride out for the spring drive to the lush mountain meadows there was no better cutting horse than Punishment.

Then came a day when the three rode out and over the long, tortuous trail to the lowlands. Two weeks later they had driven the herds slowly along this trail, strung out for miles because of the narrowness of it. They reached Tyrone Ranch just in time for Linneus to take up his journey to civilization. Riding Punishment had put him in good form. The aching in the vicinity of his ribs had not troubled him after the third or fourth time on the buckers' back. He was ready for Shocking John, provided he met with no mishap in the elimination contests and worked himself up for a try at the finals. He wondered if it would be wise and proper to ask Ozias Tyrone for Punishment, on which to ride out of the mountains.

He and the ranch owner had had very little to do with each other. He mistrusted the dark, glowering two-gun man, but he was not afraid of him. He

realized that, knowing about the gold old Asa Dyer had found and coveting it, Tyrone would not be hostile to him, however much he might dislike him. Then why not play him for all he was worth? There was one thing certain in his mind: if Tyrone would lend him Punishment on which to ride to the rodeo, there would be a deep purpose back of his seeming generosity. For Lin Columbia was virtually a stranger to him, and the horse had become a valuable one. Why not test Ozias?

He had told the dark man that he meant to go in a day or two, and had asked permission to leave his burros and outfit at the ranch until his return. Ozias had readily given his consent to the request. This, Lin reasoned, might mislead Tyrone into believing that he meant to return. He did not, of course, after what Joyce had told him. He would not cross Tyrone Ranch on his way to the upper Pipe-organ and his precious claims. Tyrone might have the burros and the outfit, for all he cared. He—Linneus Columbia—was going to be a rich mining man. What did a hundred dollars amount to with him?

He betook himself to the ranch house the night before his departure. He knocked on the door, was admitted by Joyce.

"Hello, *mestiza*," was the way he greeted her.

"Hello, gringo," she retorted.

"I'd like to trade a few linguistic curiosities with your dad," he announced.

"Stepdad," she corrected him, with a smile. "You want to talk with him?"

"How plain you put it! Yes, Miss Joyce."

She hesitated a moment, eyes downcast.

"I won't devour him," he pleaded.

"You'd choke if you tried it. It isn't that. I hear you are leaving to-morrow."

"On the trail to Shocking John."

"Will you come back through here?"

"You know I won't. There's one spot in my dome that isn't ivory. I depend on that, generally, when it becomes necessary to do a sensible thing. But, say, now! Come to think of it, I could sneak through the ranch at night. We could set a date, and you could slip out and meet me. Talk about romance? Why not do it right and proper?"

"You mustn't try that," she warned. "You couldn't make it. There'll be men stationed in Cutthroat Pass to watch for your coming. You can't avoid going through Cutthroat. There's no other route to the Peddler's Crutch."

"Is that a fact?"

"Absolutely."

"Cutthroat Pass again! That name's becomin' a regular hoodoo with me. I knew there was something gypo about it when I saw it on the map." Lin looked up comically into the girl's face and ran a finger from one ear to the other. "Me for the trail from Porcupine," he said. "Gosh-dang that Cutthroat Pass!"

"But when, then, am I to see you again? You're the only man friend I have on this rancho."

"We haven't made much of a fad of each other, at that," he reminded her. "No fault of mine. You didn't decoy me any. I was willin' to be shot."

"It wasn't my fault, either. I would like to have talked with you lots. But I knew better. He would have become suspicious. I'm merely tolerated here, for my mother's sake. Ozias Tyrone knows that I don't approve of him or his men."

"Well, I took all that into consideration," he said. "Yes, I added that to my library of poetic gems. I'm glad to know I was right, though. Well, then, when can I see you? How can I see you?"

She thought. "If you win the money at the rodeo, you'll hike straight for the Peddler's Crutch and your claims?"

"Yes, beginning the pilgrimage at Porcupine and fluttering across the Stranger to Coonskin Valley, leaving this ranch seventy miles to the east and north."

"Can't you pass through here when you come out? When will that be?"

"Can't quite tell. Maybe not until next spring. I could come this way, of course, after everything is settled regarding the claims. That is, if you think these two-gun soubrettes around here wouldn't tint my front porch for me. They'd know I'd gypped 'em, you savvy. They might tie into me, just for luck."

"And would you be afraid of that?"

"Since you put it that way, you're on. My ultimate destination, then, is Tyrone Ranch. I get here, meet you. Then what do we do next?"

"Well, I— What do you want to do?"

"Make love," said Lin. "It's a wonderful pastime."

She looked at him out of her hazel eyes as if she would read him through and through. "Aren't you a trifle sudden?" she wanted to know, and so far she had not blushed.

"I've been here nearly two months."

"You don't know anything about me, Mr. Columbia."

"I know you go to a lot of trouble to cut me out of the herd. They call me Lin."

"Oh, I'll call you Lin, all right. I'm not exactly a stick-in-the-mud. I've seen life beyond these acres. And men have made love to me, too, as far as that goes."

"I forgive them," he told her seriously. "I could acquire that habit just as easy. Do you think I'm fresh?"

"I'm just trying to decide," she said. "I have to

take into consideration your perpetual flippant manner and—”

“Pan it to see if there’s any gold in the stuff,” he finished for her. “Well, I can’t talk human. I don’t like to. I like to talk Lin Columbia. That’s my mother tongue. Listen, *mestiza*: I’m as serious as a frog.”

“You’re actually proposing to me?”

“That’s what I’m aimin’ to do, *mestiza*.”

“Why do you call me *mestiza*?”

“I like to. Does that settle that?”

She laughed in spite of herself. “Well, we’re getting nowhere—exactly. But I’ll say this: I’d like to see you again, no matter how—how things come out. I believe you are serious—or think you are. And I can’t treat seriousness lightly. Come back and we’ll—we’ll find out about each other. Here comes Mr. Tyrone. Good-by.” She gave him her little brown hand. “I can’t see you when you leave. Be good! And ride Shocking John to a standstill.”

“Good-by, *mestiza*,” was all that Lin had time to say before Ozias Tyrone came from an inner room of the house.

With surprising readiness Ozias Tyrone gave the supplicant permission to ride Punishment out of the mountains.

CHAPTER VII

SHOCKING JOHN

LIN felt his first touch of civilization when he reached Spruce, a little foothill mining town to the south of Tyrone Ranch. Here he left Punishment on pasture, in the care of a friend of Ozias Tyrone, as he had been instructed to do. Then he took train for San Francisco.

He spent two days in the city looking up old acquaintances, for he knew people throughout the entire West. Then he shipped his outfit to Selden and followed it in person.

When he reached the prosperous little town, a hundred miles inland from the coast, he found that the buckaroos, cow-girls, and Indians were already assembling. In Carlton's big general store he signed up in the rodeo entry book. Next day, with a hundred others, he went to the rodeo committee's headquarters.

Here they made a picturesque gathering—the Indians in their feathers and bright colors; the pretty cowgirls in chaps or divided skirts and wearing shirts or waists of gaudy hues, or buckskin fringed and ornamented; the bowlegged *vaqueros*, spurred, heeled, brown-faced and solemn of mien under wide-brimmed Stetsons.

A committeeman called out the names of the entrants. From a sombrero laid crown-down on a table each drew a rolled piece of paper and handed it to another

committeeman. He in turn unrolled the pellet and announced the name of the horse that the contestant was to ride.

"Don Malone on Spiderlegs!" he would drawl. "Pete Giffin on Hot Dog! Eddie Gilford on Come-across! Mary Williamson on Hoffman's Boss! Art Stanley on Hefty Hank! Donaldina Hale on Gibson's Lady!" And, in the course of time: "Lin Columbia on Texas Blood!"

"Who's this Columbia gent?" one oldtime rodeo follower asked of another.

But his answer was a shake of the head. "Some new horn-in, I reckon. He's ridin' a *horse*."

"He's ridin' a *horse*," replied his friend.

Just after noon next day a great throng was pouring through the big gates of the rodeo park. The bleachers soon were packed. Across the broad arena the contestants sat their saddles—Indians, Mexicans, cowgirls, and grinning punchers. The band played ceaselessly. In the crow's nest in the center of the arena were the judges and the timers.

Shortly before one o'clock a great, hoarse shout went up from the expectant throng. Into the arena, on a magnificent white horse, rode the president of the rodeo, seated in the unbelievably handsome first-prize saddle. He had chosen for his companion pretty Dolly Robinson, one of the entrants, who rode a coal-black stallion. The girl wore a neat riding suit of orange velvet, trimmed with black, and a marvelous Mexican sombrero to match. The silver of their equipment glittered in the noonday sun.

"Let 'er buck!" roared the clamoring crowd.

A long shout arose from the picturesque gathering across the arena. Simultaneously more than a hundred horses leaped into action. In a long, colorful stream, with clouds of dust above them, the contest-

ants rode in a mad circle about the track, while the president and the girl waved their hands and the spectators yelled themselves hoarse.

The rodeo was on.

Lin Columbia rode Texas Blood to a standstill that afternoon; rode Lazy Louie—who proved anything but lazy—and Mary's Lamb. He finished well. Many entrants were eliminated that day, but Lin was numbered among the twenty-three who would ride in the semifinals the following afternoon. The much advertised wild horse, Shocking John, had not been brought out for the elimination contest.

But he was out for the semifinals next afternoon. Lin studied him. He was a magnificent roan with a beautiful mane and tail and a wicked, rolling eye. Bill Steward, of Oklahoma, drew him for the semifinals. Three leaps from the big horse and Bill was on his back, wallowing in a cloud of dust.

"You dropped somethin', cowboy!" a fellow contestant drawled at him.

From the hat Lin Columbia drew his folded-up pellet and handed it to the announcer. The megaphone was trained on the crowd and bawled:

"Lin Columbia rides Whiskers!"

"Let 'er buck!" the crowd roared back. "Ride 'im, cowboy!"

Lin rode Whiskers to the satisfaction of the judges, though he longed for the pistol shot before the ordeal was over. His poorly knitted ribs were hurting again. The shot came at last, and a "pick-up man" rode alongside the buckner and took him up. Lin walked to a seat and sat down dizzily. It seemed that the breath of life had been denied him. He sat there, white-faced and gulping, and a fellow rider jeered at him:

"Did he meddle with yer in'ards, buckaroo?"

A humorous retort sprang to Lin's lips, but his

tongue refused to say the words. He sat there speechless, grinning, wondering stupidly if he would ever breathe naturally again.

He had not been out of the saddle five minutes when he heard the raucous voice of the announcer bawling through the megaphone the result of his second drawing for that day:

"Lin Columbia rides Walking-beam!"

"Let 'er buck!" roared the crowd.

With a long sigh of pain Lin Columbia rose to his feet. The new terror that he must mount was being led by the wranglers into the arena. The man who was doing his saddling for him had already grasped horn and cantle. Lin was sick—sick all through. He could not do it! His head was swimming even now, his side ached furiously, and his eyes were glazed. The throng would not understand. He would be ridiculed off the field if he declined to ride the horse. But he must! He could not stand any more punishment and live.

A hush hung over the arena. The wranglers and his saddler were struggling with Walking-beam, who fought against the snubbing up. The spectators watched, silent.

Lin swung about to face the judges in the crow's nest. He held up his hand to attract attention. "I'll have to—" He gulped over his words of surrender. And from the grandstand a single shrill voice filled the break:

"*Ride 'im, gringo!*"

Lin Columbia started, doubted his ears, stood as if petrified and gazed toward the crowd. In the midst of it a lone figure suddenly sprang erect and waved a hat.

"What do you want?" asked a judge, leaning over toward him.

"Nothin'," Lin replied, and walked toward the plunging horse.

That same voice had encouraged him when he first rode Punishment. It was Joyce Larue who had shouted to him, his *mestiza* of Tyrone Ranch.

Three seconds later he was on the heaving back of Walking-beam, fighting nausea and pain and dizziness, and making the ride of his life.

"Stay a long time, cowboy!" the shrill voice filled another lull in the clamor of the crowd. "Scratch 'im, Lin!"

Blind, suffocated, racked with pain, Lin Columbia set his teeth and raked the horse with his rowels from withers to rump. Hours passed, it seemed to him. The world had always heaved this way—why wonder at it now! On and on through endless time it would continue to heave, and—

Bang!

What was that? Oh, the pistol! The judges were satisfied. The pick-up man galloped up beside him and took the halter rope from his hand.

"Thought for a while your horse was gonta drop his handkerchief," drawled the wrangler, as Lin slipped to the ground. "But you sure got glue on your pants, cowboy!"

The world still heaved and shuddered violently as Lin threw himself on the ground.

How he accomplished it he never knew, but he rode another buckner that day—Thunderbolt. Then, somehow, he got away from the arena and into a taxicab, and was taken to his hotel.

He sent for a doctor, who examined him and told him nothing beyond the information that he ought not to ride next day.

"Why, am I in the finals?" he marveled. "By gosh! I didn't stop to find out."

"Sure you are," replied the doctor. "You and two more. All the others were eliminated to-day. You'll be up against the world's champion to-morrow. Sorry, but you'll kill yourself, man. Better give it up."

"Oh, no," said Lin. "Somebody yelled 'Stay a long time' at me, and I gotta stick. Strap up my ribs and let me rest. To-morrow I'm ridin' Shocking John."

The doctor shook his head and fished in his case for wide strips of adhesive tape with which to bind his ribs.

When he had gone Lin lay back and sought repose, thinking of that unexpected cry from the grandstand, wondering that the *mestiza* should be there.

He felt almost all right next morning. By noon he was feeling better still. At three o'clock in the afternoon he was ready to face the greatest ordeal of his life. He would win third money, anyway—two hundred and fifty dollars. He had made this a positive fact by his marvelous riding in the semifinals, in which all but three riders had been disqualified. But he did not want third money. He did not want second money. He wanted to conquer Shocking John for the championship of the world—and he badly needed the rewards of such a conquest.

"Lin Columbia rides Fool Killer!" boomed through the megaphone.

"Let 'er buck!" clamored the frantic throng.

He was up; the horse was off; the fun was on—for the spectators.

Lin's stiffened ribs did not pain him so terribly as his body followed the gyrations of Fool Killer. He fanned him; he raked him fore and aft; he rode him to a panting standstill. The crowd yelled hoarse approval as he slipped to earth again. The judges nodded at one another and smiled.

It seemed that he had not been allowed to rest ten

seconds before the announcer was drawling mournfully over the vast arena:

"Lin Columbia rides Shocking John!"

The crowd roared back at him. The volume of sound simmered down to an occasional shout. Then came that clear, piercing call again.

"Ride 'im, cowboy! Ride Shocking John! You know!"

Lin swung his hat off and waved it at the thousands of faces that gleamed at him. Somewhere among them was the face of the girl from the Pipe-organ country, the *mestiza* of Tyrone Ranch.

The sweating wranglers were having it out with the wiry roan in their efforts to snub him up and saddle him. He fought them, forestriking, biting, kicking. Once he stood on his hind feet and cake-walked about, snapping viciously. He jerked free, leaped entirely over the patient little snubbing horse without so much as grazing saddle leather with his body. A wrangler on the other side caught him and the fight continued. His wild eyes rolled as they finally conquered him and snubbed his head up close to the saddie horn.

The blindfold was on. The saddle went up and came down softly. Quickly the cinches were drawn under him, the latigoes knotted.

Lin studied the horse, watched his every move. He watched the saddling, too. Everything was to his satisfaction. He turned to the judges and nodded briefly.

"He's goin' up!"

"Scratch 'im plenty, cowboy!"

The snubbing rope sang. Shocking John was free. Up in the air he mounted on his long hind legs, deliberately walked six steps in a manlike manner, then leaped forward, shaped like a hairpin.

His tactics were Punishment's all over again. Instantly Lin recognized this and grinned. Before the

horse was in his second leap he rowled him fiercely from withers to rump.

Then they were off in a series of gigantic leaps, and each time the great horse struck the ground it was like the stroke of a piledriver. He bucked exactly as Punishment had bucked, but it seemed to the harassed rider that he leaped three times as high, three times as fast, and landed three times harder than the Tyrone horse.

He felt that same terrible pain when the horse came down, had the distinct, terrifying impression that his backbone had been snapped in two. He was pitched from the cantle to the saddle horn in the winking of an eyelash, but he kept his seat and continued to scratch the wild horse unmercifully.

Dully to his ears came the booming roar of the delighted crowd. He jerked off his hat and fanned. He raked him in midair. It seemed, when Shocking John went up, that he would never come down again—that the earth was miles below him. But when he did come down it was as if a stick of dynamite had exploded under the saddle.

"Oh, cowboy! You're ridin' 'im! Stay a long time!"

Shocking John had not covered a radius of fifty feet since his preliminary dart into the air. There he stayed in the center of the arena, directly before the judges' stand, and soared into nothingness, to strike the ground with a shock that tore at his rider's vitals and blinded him. Blood was streaming from Lin's nose. He had bitten his tongue. His jaw muscles, even, ached. His back, he knew, was broken. Up, down! Up, down! Up, down! It was endless. Forever and forever he must be tortured this way. He had done something wicked upon earth, and this endless torment was his punishment. Up, down! Up, down!

Then, without an instant's warning, such a cruel pain short through his body that a cry was forced from his lips. Everything went black.

He did not know, until he was told afterward, how he had shot from the saddle through the air, a limp, unstruggling mass, to strike the ground with a horrible thud and lie there motionless while the infuriated horse tried to kill him with vicious lunges of his fore feet. When they tenderly lifted him up they found that the wild horse had broken his right leg. He had fainted in the saddle from that shaft of pain that had shot through him. Shocking John had pitched him into the air in an unconscious condition. Miraculously his feet had not caught in the stirrups. He had landed in a heap, and the horse had mauled him cruelly before any one could hurry to the rescue.

Shocking John had not conquered Lin Columbia. For Lin Columbia, conscious, had ridden him manfully. Shocking John had not pitched from his back a man who was fighting back, but an inert, helpless victim of fate, who had fought the good fight and lost.

"Too bad! Too bad!" they muttered as they bore the unconscious rider to the ambulance.

And after the closing of the performance the sympathetic crowd trailed homeward, buzzing: "The championship was his up until— What happened to him, anyway? He was settin' pretty, and then, all of a sudden—bang! Somethin' funny about that. Stayed eighteen seconds. Two seconds more and he'd won the extra thousand. Tough luck for that Columbia boy, all right."

And in a hotel room at Selden a girl sobbed softly.

CHAPTER VIII

DAYS OF MISFORTUNE

LINNEUS COLUMBIA regained consciousness in a ward of the county hospital. His broken leg had been set and was incased in a plaster cast. He stared at it dully, suffering from a terrific headache and nausea. Then he grinned.

"Linneus," he remarked drolly to himself, still staring at his leg, "they've tied something onto you."

Then he slept.

When he was himself mentally again he became an important personage in the ward. His fellow sufferers had, of course, heard all about the rodeo and his mysterious defeat on the back of Shocking John.

"I don't savvy myself," he tried to explain it. "I was full o' business, o' course, for Shocking John was shakin' up the ginfizzes for me pretty regular. It wasn't long between drinks, either. He was lettin' me in for a lot o' turmoil, but I was standin' the gaff, considerin' my tender years and inexperience, even if it is me that's doin' the maintainin'. Then all of a sudden—*bing!*—somebody shot the lights out and I was embalmed for shipment East. I don't even know when I got up and gave John my seat. But what I want is something in my mind that rhymes with this"—and he pointed to his elephantine leg. "Who stepped on my bunion, I wanta know?"

For several days he lay there thinking about Joyce Larue, wondering how she came to be at the rodeo,

unbeknown to him, wondering why she did not come to see him now. He decided, however, that her stepfather had come with her and that she did not dare displease him. Then one day a nurse handed him a letter.

Lin's blue eyes brightened as he read it. Joyce told how, at the last moment, her stepfather and Noah Littlejohn had decided to attend the rodeo and how she had pleaded to go along and had won. She had suspected that Tyrone was going solely to keep Lin under observation. Ozias Tyrone had railed at her for shouting at Lin from the grandstand, and had seemed suspicious afterward, often eyeing her closely as if intent on finding out just what tie there could be between her and the buckaroo. So she had not dared to visit him in the hospital. She had written the letter at Spruce, on their way back to Tyrone Ranch, and had mailed it secretly. It finished as follows:

You have my sympathy. But everything will come out all right in the end. I wish that you could write to me, but that is out of the question. You rode wonderfully, and it is a mystery to all of us what happened to you. I know that you must have been unconscious when you shot from the saddle. Make them take good care of you, and get well as quickly as you can. And watch out for Noah Littlejohn. He didn't go back with us. I'm worried over what he may be up to.

MESTIZA.

"Just like that!" Lin muttered happily. "Not Joyce Larue, nor Joyce—just '*Mestiza*.' I'll keep that little trophy in my hall of memory. Yes, sir—I lean to that a-plenty."

The day after he received the precious letter another man with a broken leg was carried into the ward—the victim of an automobile accident. He did not remain

long in the county hospital, for friends came and took him away as soon as he was well enough to be driven to a private institution, where he would have better care. He occupied the bed next to Lin's after the setting of his leg; and before they took him away the two struck up an acquaintanceship.

When this man was well enough to talk the genial child of the West opened the conversation.

"Well, Limpy-go-fetch-it," he asked with a grin, "who stepped on your corns?"

The patient, a young man of about Lin's own age, smiled wanly.

"Automobile," he stated. "Turned out to avoid a crash with a road hog and went over the bank. Where did you get yours?"

"Me? Why, old Shocking John nudged me for a bust," said Lin.

"I don't believe I follow you."

"John did, they tell me. I don't savvy anything about it. I was visiting the angels while John took up the collection and played 'The Dyin' Cowboy' on my piano."

"Just what are you talking about, anyway, please?" asked the other.

He was a good-looking young man, with curly, dark brown hair and a pleasing face. His eyes were big and trusting. He "took his medicine" as gamely as did the philosophic Lin.

"I'll explain," said Lin. "I tried to motorbrunk Shocking John into the world's championship and he slipped me the nosedive. Don't you savvy? John fed me to Mother Earth. He thanked me for my seat. He throbbed me for a thud—fidgeted me elsewhere. You see, I got the wax impression that I was a saddle comedian. I oozed along through the elimination frolic, nursed my way through the semifinals, and

fudged myself up on Shocking John to sneeze myself into five hundred smackers, the world's championship saddle, and a thousand presidential portraits on the side. But John tempted me to ride and soar. He thought I was a gopher that had lost his hole, so he set me down in front of it and tried to push me in."

The pale man beside him shook his head.

"Aw, he's crazy with the heat!" another patient said. "He's trying to tell you that he was riding for the bucking championship of the world, and a horse named Shocking John threw him and broke his leg. He won third money, though."

"I thank you, *compadre*," said Lin politely. "How plain you make it! But John didn't throw me, if you'll stand corrected. When the cuckoo steps out of your clock, let him warble this: I went to sleep and dreamed that I was dancing with a girl named Gladys. And John decoyed me into the air and wiped his feet on me for a chaser. Do I render myself articulate?"

"You hit the ground, didn't you?"

"Your pardon! I have contracted the smoking idea that the ground hit me."

Three days elapsed before Lin's fellow-sufferer was carried on a stretcher to the ambulance, to be transferred to a private hospital. During those three days the two became very well acquainted. Jeffrey Deville was the name of the road hog's victim. He proved to be genial and good natured, and Lin, always ready to make friends, took a great fancy to him.

He in turn "fell for" Lin, as the child of the West interpreted it. Lin's constant flow of quaint expressions amused and delighted him, and Lin's philosophical acceptance of the bad luck that had overtaken him aroused the other's admiration.

He seemed to be constantly studying Lin throughout their many conversations. Often Lin would be lying

with his eyes staring at the ceiling, to turn his head suddenly and find Deville's glance fixed steadily on his face. Deville told Lin very little about himself, except that he was unmarried, and, at the time of the accident, had been unemployed.

On the other hand, Lin had a great deal to say about his past adventures, to the huge satisfaction of his rapt listener. But he divulged nothing about his rich gold discovery at the upper reaches of the Pipe-organ. He only stated that his leg had been broken at a particularly inopportune time, and that he "stood to lose" something big if he was detained too long, provided his failure to ride Shocking John had not already rendered accomplishment of his purpose impossible. But he never complained.

He missed Jeffrey Deville when they had taken him away. After his departure the days dragged with him. He thought that perhaps Deville might drop him a line to ask how he was progressing, or have somebody call up the hospital and inquire. But nothing occurred in this connection.

Six weeks passed, and then they removed the plaster cast from his leg. A long conference of doctors followed, and, time and again, one doctor after another came and gave him a critical examination. Then he was told the bitter truth.

The setting of the bones had been a careless, bungling job. The leg had set crooked on account of this. The right foot toed in toward the left. It would always remain thus out of line and make the leg appear deformed. Also it would render Lin's walking very awkward, unless—

"Unless what?" asked Lin innocently.

"Unless we break the leg again and do the work all over," was the grim reply.

"*You break my leg—deliberately?*" Lin puzzled.

"Oh, yes," was the cheerful reply. "That's nothing. It's done frequently. About seven months ago we broke and reset a man's arm six times before we got it just to suit us."

"And then I guess you were satisfied," drawled Lin. "Me, I might as well have stayed under the hoofs of Shocking John. Well, what d'ye break her with—a sledge? I never amounted to anything, anyway. Hop to it! Though I'll tell you this, doc: if she comes out this time with the toes facin' to the rear, I'm just as likely to walk backwards as forwards. But let your brain cells grasp this trifling fancy: If you're in front of me, I reckon I'll be inclined to move forward. And, doc, when I move I move! Shoot the piece!"

So they put him under the influence of ether, broke his leg again and reset it. It was the middle of September before he was able to hop out on the hospital veranda on crutches, to add his whimsical cheerfulness to the conversation of the other convalescents.

One afternoon a group of them were seated at one end of the long veranda, smoking and talking or playing cards. Lin was sitting in the background, almost hidden in the shade cast by a thick mat of climbing vines.

A man, walking with a cane, stepped from the ward to the veranda and peered about at the little group. He took several steps toward them. Oldtimers recognized him as Jeffrey Deville.

"Where's Lin Columbia?" he asked, before any one could greet him.

Quick as a flash a croaking voice piped up from the shade of the vines:

"He cheated at leapfrog and killed himself from remorse."

Deville failed to recognize the disguised voice of his old bedside companion. He smiled thinly.

"Hello, boys!" he said. "How are you all, anyway? I had a devil of a time after I left here for San Francisco. Blood poisoning set in. I was pretty bad. When I got on my feet I began trying to find Lin Columbia, the fellow who bunked beside me when I was here. I was in San Francisco, and I called on several friends of his whom he had told me about. They had not seen nor heard from him. By accident, I met a fellow who had something to do with that rodeo here in Selden. He told me he had heard it was necessary to rebreak Lin's leg and set it again. He thought that perhaps he was still in the county hospital. I'm looking for him. Now, please, what has become of Columbia?"

"His mother fed him Mexican peppers, then locked him in the closet for cryin'," came the doleful strain from the shade.

Deville's dark eyes narrowed and he peered suspiciously into the shadows behind the vines. "Columbia," he said sternly, while a smile wrinkled the corners of his mouth, "if that's you I'll break both legs for you and let them dangle."

"Hop to it!" said Lin. "It's me."

CHAPTER IX

BLOODHOUND EYES

ONE limping slightly and the other decidedly, the two men sought out a quiet nook in the hospital court and sat together on a bench.

"I've been rather anxious to see you," Jeffrey Deville began. "Lin, I don't mind admitting that you appeal to me. You're so fresh, so good-natured, such a good sport, and you've lived such an interesting life, that I got to thinking I'd like to know you better. I remembered what you told me about your plans having been knocked all to smash by your accident. If you feel so disposed, I'd like to have you confide in me. Maybe I can see a way to help you out of your difficulties."

"Thank you kindly, old playfellow," Lin returned warmly. "But I guess you can't help me. This is a matter of money. They're sendin' me through the chute to-morrow—loadin' me on a cruel world. I got the two hundred and fifty dollars that I won as third prize in the bucking contest—that's all. I need fifteen hundred at least to put my stuff across. I'll get it—but it'll take over a year. My two fifty will just about hold me up till my leg is well enough to carry me into the hills."

"Why wait over a year? Maybe I can help you. The word 'money' doesn't frighten me away."

"Got any of that darling stuff?"

"Well, I'm not broke. My father and mother are dead. My sister and I have twenty thousand apiece from the estate. As I'm not an out-and-out spend-thrift, I don't know what to do with it all. I manage to get away with about ten thousand and reinvest the balance. Not much of a sport, am I?"

"*Compadre*," asked Lin Columbia, with a look of awe in his eyes, "are you endeavoring to break to me the news that, every year you pluck twenty thousand golden apples from the atmosphere?"

"That's it. Stocks and bonds."

"You're one o' these here coupon kids?"

Jeffrey laughed and nodded.

"And you want to let me frolic in the glow of those golden emblems?"

Another nod.

Lin reached into his pocket and took out the glittering samples of ore from the upper reaches of the Pipe-organ.

"Look 'em over," he invited nonchalantly. "I know where there's a hill full of 'em. What's bitin' on me is this broken leg and the lack of money that keeps me from disturbin' their deep repose. My claims will run a hundred dollars to the ton. I've got to get to 'em and do my assessment work before next March, or somebody may stumble onto my monuments and make a new filin'. I had no witnesses, you know. I recorded without them.

"Winter's on the wing and I can't walk. I want a partner who can grub-stake himself aplenty, and go up in there with some muckers and rush the assessment work to completion before the snows get too heavy. Then next spring, when I can make it in easily, this bird and I will go together, build a road, and—sit pretty for the remainder of our days. By the time I'll be able to hike up this fall, the snow will keep me out."

"Lin, do you mean to tell me that you have found a fortune?"

"Just about. There's no other name for it. There's plenty o' water, and all that, but it's a hard trip out, even after a road has been built. But it'll pay big in the long run. A man wouldn't be a sucker to invest a hundred thousand in makin' it possible to get that ore to a mill, or in buildin' a mill out in the mountains. But a good wagon road would be the first caper to cut, of course. Then haul out enough ore to earn the money to build your stamp mill on the claims."

"Have you tried to interest any capitalists in your project?"

"Haven't had the time. Don't know any. Wanted to cinch the thing first—see? Time enough to try and interest capital when I've done my year's assessment work, and have something to show."

"M'm-m! Guess I'd be fit to go into the mountains in about a month from now. I'd like a thing like that. I'm bored stiff with life. How'd you like to try me, Lin?"

"You look like a dazzling prospectus to me," Lin replied. "And I haven't anything to conceal. I'll trust you. Get a couple of good miners and a guide to go with you and I'll supply you with a map and tell you just how to find the ledge. Then take an abundance of samples and come out and have 'em assayed. Then, if you're satisfied that I've got something and want to go ahead, come to me and we'll talk turkey. There'll still be plenty of time to do the assessment work before snow flies, if we take a bunch of laborers and rush the thing along. Think it over, Jeff. Keep those samples. I brought 'em along for just such a purpose."

"Lin, you're more serious than I ever saw you be-

fore," laughed Jeffrey, and his brown eyes were sparkling with enthusiasm.

"Become infatuated with that idea, *compadre*. This is the most serious day in my life. I'm makin' good medicine—just go to press with that."

"I'll see you to-morrow," said Deville, rising hurriedly and slipping the ore samples into his pocket.

Next morning, just as Lin was making his preparations to leave the hospital and begin living up his two hundred and fifty dollars, Deville appeared again.

"I suppose you'll be heading for San Fran right away," was his opening remark.

"Yes," said Lin. "I'll make that headquarters till I'm on my feet for good again. Live cheaper up there."

"Take you up in my machine," offered Jeffrey. "We can talk matters over on the way. I'm deeply interested, I'll admit. It's not so much the idea of making money that intrigues me. I want to be doing something, and while I'm about it I might as well do something picturesque as something commonplace. I like to rough it, too—had quite a bit of experience. Come on and ride up with me, Columbia."

"Oh, I haven't objected to that at all," Lin hurriedly assured him.

They left the hospital together. Lin collected his few belongings, which consisted mostly of saddle and bridle, and threw them into the tonneau of Deville's expensive gray car.

And as the big machine purred softly down the street a man with a ghost-white face, peeled and slick like a scar, and eye sockets that sagged down like a bloodhound's, drooped the window curtain that he had been holding in a room across the street from the entrance to the hospital. Noah Littlejohn hurried down the stairs of the cheap hotel and leaped into a small curtained car waiting before the door.

"That's the machine goin' ahead there," he told the driver. "Jest keep her in sight if ye can, brother. Go wherever she does. I'll pay ye."

It had been a long, weary wait for Noah Littlejohn, but he believed, and his boss believed, that it would be worth their while to keep tabs on Lin Columbia. Noah had returned to the remote ranch once after the rodeo, having learned from one of the hospital attendants, whom he bribed, that Lin Columbia was to have his leg rebroken and set in a plaster cast again. Ozias Tyrone had sent him back in the course of time, footing all expenses of his stay in the little hotel opposite the hospital entrance.

He had known to the day and hour when Lin was to leave the hospital, for the spy that he had engaged was anxious to earn his money. Littlejohn had known, too, of the growing friendship between Jeffrey Deville and Lin. He had been told of Deville's call on Lin the day before the latter's departure. Rather clever in his way, Noah had found Jeffrey's name in the San Francisco city directory. He had made inquiry; and, one piece of information leading to another, he had finally learned that Jeffrey was a man of means. Intuition told him that Lin was trying to interest the young man in claims on the upper Pipe-organ. The same medium conveyed to him, perhaps, the idea that, once out of the hospital, Lin would go to San Francisco with Deville. So here he was, hot on the trail of Lin Columbia's gold, propped up, lean and forlorn-looking, in the tonneau of the wheezing little car.

Lin and Jeffrey, deep in conversation and plannings, drove slowly in the big gray machine. It was no difficult matter for the flivver to keep it in sight until they reached the outskirts of San Francisco. Here Noah made the driver stop and let him out. He wrinkled his peeled face over the amount of his bill,

but paid it. He took a street car to the heart of the city. He did not longer need the little car, for he knew that Jeffrey Deville and his sister Agnes lived in a suite in the fashionable St. Ignatius Hotel. He would go to that part of the city and plan a way to continue his tireless vigil.

He saw nothing more of the gray car that day. He reached that part of the city in which Jeffrey's hotel was situated. Loafing about in the street a time, with his eyes on the liveried attendant who marched pompously before the revolving doors in the hotel entrance, he tried to puzzle out a way to continue his surveillance.

Finally it occurred to him that he had made a mistake in dismissing his hired machine. It might have been possible for his driver to trail Deville's car through the heavy traffic and find out where he kept it. This knowledge would have been of vast advantage to the schemer from Tyrone Ranch. However, there were other ways of finding that out. One of them was to make deft inquiry of some hotel employee.

"That Ike millin' around over there looks like the President o' th' United States to me," he observed to himself. "I reckon he's got a brandin' iron stuck down his back inside his shirt, th' way he bends. Look at 'im salutin' them birds that's goin' in now. Wonder if he'd salute me?"

Noah looked down at his colorless trousers, rolled up three inches at the bottom and displaying the legs of his mail-order boots. His work shirt, frayed red tie, canvas coat, and his cheap slouch hat did not have a reassuring effect when he took cognizance of them.

"I oughta bought me a suit and perked up a bit," he decided. "I don't reckon that jasper over there owns the blamed hotel, but he acts like he did. I'm

gonna make medicine with 'im, anyway. He can't do no more'n kick me off th's sidewalk."

So he shambled across the street, the picture of a man who walks only when he is unable to catch a horse, and accosted the man in the gold-lace cap and the long maroon coat.

The stoical doorman saluted him politely when it became apparent that this out-of-place creature was about to address him. His sphinxlike face showed no sign of amusement, animosity, good will, inquisitiveness, nor anything but strict attention to the grave business of marching before the revolving door and occasionally calling a taxicab for some one.

Noah Littlejohn cleared his throat.

"Brother," he began, "I'm from Tyrone Ranch, up in the high country. Maybe ye've heered tell of 'er."

"I think not, sir," said the wooden lips.

"Well, anyway, I'm new in th' city and kinda green. I got in this mornin' in my car. I got me a room clost to here, jest around th' corner. An' I wanta put my automobile in a garage clost by somewheres. I thought maybe ye could tell me where the folks that stops at yer *ho-tel* put their cars. That'd be jest th' place fer me, 'cause my room is right around th' corner."

"There's the Standard Garage, sir, on Hillcrest Avenue. There's the Yolanda Garage a block farther north. Some of our guests keep their cars in these places."

"I thank ye," said Noah politely. Then he seemed at a loss how to progress further. "I'll step around and see these places."

The attendant saluted him again as he turned. Noah returned the salute profoundly and slouched up the street. The ghost of a smile flitted across the lips of the man in the maroon coat.

Noah Littlejohn received a distinct shock as he

reached the wide entrance to the Standard Garage. He had barely time to shrink against a building and turn his back, for two men, deep in conversation, limped from the garage just then, one on crutches, the other using a cane. They were Jeffrey Deville and Lin Columbia, who, directly after entering the business part of the city, had gone to the assay office to which Jeffrey had taken the samples of ore. This had detained them in reaching the garage where Jeffrey kept his car, greatly to the betterment of Noah Littlejohn's prospects for keeping them under his eye.

They did not notice him, but rounded the corner and continued on toward the St. Ignatius.

Noah stepped quickly back to the corner and watched. He saw an almost human smile come to the lips of the man in the brass buttoned coat of maroon as he saluted Jeffrey.

The doors revolved; the new friends limped into the wide marble approach to the lobby of the St. Ignatius.

Noah Littlejohn observed the reflection of his skinned, white face in a plate-glass window before him. He winked at it, and one of the bloodhound eyes of the image winked knowingly back at him.

CHAPTER X

AGNES

LINNEUS COLUMBIA was nobody's fool. He had not always been a cowpuncher, prospector, freighter, or tramp. At some dimly remembered time in his past he had attended college, had lived with an old-fashioned father and mother in an old-fashioned home, and had known an old-fashioned culture which would have surprised the men with whom he had associated for the ten years since he succumbed to the wanderlust and put these things behind him.

The father and mother were dead now, and Lin was alone in the world. There had been nothing to take him back to the quaint old mansion on Nob Hill, the onetime fashionable residence district of the city in which he now found himself, so he had kept on wandering.

But he had not forgotten. And after a single gasp of surprise and consternation when he entered the suite of Deville and his sister in the St. Ignatius, he hobbled with easy familiarity across gleaming hardwood floors, deep-piled Sarouks and Kermanshahs, parked one of his crutches and held out a hand to Agnes, to whom Jeffrey was introducing him.

He found himself gazing into deep, dark eyes, knew that he was admiring the rich coloring of the girl's smooth cheeks, felt the warmth of her soft, white hand.

"Steady, O Linneus," he mentally warned himself.

"This isn't a cow corral. Don't spring any leaks in your brain pan."

The handsomely gowned girl gracefully swept her white arm toward a deep overstuffed mohair chair before an open fire. Lin waited until she had seated herself on his left, then sank into the feathery depths until he imagined he was going through to the floor.

"Careful, Linneus!" he cautioned himself. "They didn't stuff chairs with quicksand when you were on this earth the first time. Nut! You pretty near grabbed at somethin' to hold on to! Remember, now, that when you sit down again you don't sit in the place you aim at. You just get aboard, and the padded elevator takes you down a foot nearer to the floor. That's lesson Number One. Lean to it, student!"

Jeffrey Deville had a great deal to tell his sister about Lin Columbia, though he had already told her much. Agnes stopped her enthusiastic brother and begged Lin to tell his own story in the language that Jeffrey had told her about, which she had heard was known as Lin Columbia. So Lin launched forth in his quaint and characteristic manner, and as he progressed his confidence grew.

It was not long before the handsome girl was laughing heartily at Lin's "method of attack," and the glances that brother and sister cast frequently at each other said, plainer than words: "Isn't this rich?" Lin knew that he was making a decided hit and turned himself loose. He "intrigued a bunch of ostracized fads and hell-loose-notions," he later told himself, and became a "folklore urchin" for the girl's amusement. An hour and a half had passed before the three got down to talking of gold and trails and an envisioned road through the trackless wilderness of the high Sierra.

Lunch was served in the hotel suite, and afterward the three continued their absorbing conversation. It

was just before Lin started to take his leave, about three o'clock in the afternoon, that Jeffrey stood up and placed both hands on his shoulders.

"To-morrow," he said, "I'll begin getting ready to start for Porcupine. I've thought it all out. I'm willing to take a chance. You look good to me, Lin-neus. Have your maps and everything ready. I don't even know where I'm to head for when I leave Porcupine, you know. You see how I trust you. So dope it all out for me to-night and I'll be off as soon as my leg can carry me."

"I'll memorize that," Lin said. "I'll be ready for you in the morning."

"You'll come and see me often, won't you, after Jeff has gone?" asked Agnes suddenly. "I'll be pretty lonesome, you know." There was deeper color still in her cheeks as she gave her hand to Lin in parting.

"Sure—sure," the brother answered for his new-found friend. "I want him to come every day, Agnes."

"I won't take much herding to get me here," said Lin, and for an instant he looked straight into the girl's dark eyes.

Her color deepened again and she turned her head slightly. Agnes Deville was a tantalizingly pretty girl. Lin drank in the beauty of her profile, drew in his breath sharply and swung about to go.

Shortly after the lunch hour next day the patient Noah Littlejohn, hanging about in the vicinity of the St. Ignatius Hotel, saw the two cripples come from the entrance and set off slowly down the street.

"Gonna take the air a little, I reckon," decided Noah, as he began following them half a block behind.

Three blocks from the hotel the quarry entered upon a street devoted in great measure to stores. Three doors from the corner they passed out of sight through a doorway.

Noah hurried forward until he was at the edge of the plate-glass windows in the building's front. He peered cautiously inside, but the store was a large one and he saw many people walking about, but not the two whose business he wanted to know. A glance at the window display showed him that this was a sporting goods store. He looked about helplessly and saw a newsboy standing at the curb.

He beckoned him across.

"Poiper, mister?"

"No. But listen here, son. Did ye jest see a couple o' jaspers limp into this here store? One on crutches, t'other'n with a cane?"

"Sure. I made 'em."

"Well an' good. Slip inside, sonny, and find 'em. Hang around and find out what they're up to. Try to sell 'em a paper—see? Notice what they're buyin'. Savvy?"

"Sure. What's in it, mister?"

"Two bits."

"Them birds that runs this store don't allow me to peddle poipers inside. Make it a half."

"Well-l-l, I'll do that if ye find out anythin'. If ye don't—two bits."

"Fair enough!" And the boy slipped through the great swinging doors.

Noah stepped from before the show windows and waited.

It was fully ten minutes before the boy returned.

"Did ye find 'em?"

"Sure. Dey're only on de foist floor."

"What're they at, sonny?"

"Dey're buyin' some funny kind o' saddles, dey looked like to me. But I never seen a saddle like 'em before. Look, mister! Dere ain't no settin' place on

dem saddles. Dey're like dis—" and he held up two dirty fingers and crossed them to form an X.

"Pack saddles, by thunder!" wheezed Noah Littlejohn. "Here's yer money, son. Ye've earned her."

And as the boy eagerly grasped the coin the tall, peeled-faced man went swinging up the street with rapid strides.

In his room he wrote the following letter, which he hurried out to mail:

MR. OZIAS TYRONE,

Tyrone Ranch, Spruce, California:

DERE OZIAS:

Columbia has got a rich feller to go in with him on that gold proposition. They are buying pack saddles to-day. You know what that means, of course. But if this rich feller is going along it won't be for some little time yet, because he is still limping. Columbia is on crutches, so he is not going at all. Not for months, maybe. You better have somebody camping in Cutthroat Pass to get on the trail of whoever comes through. I am going to porcupine rite away and wate there in case they come that way. Which is likely they will. You may not here from me again for months, but rest assured i will be on the job. I guess we haven't waisted oure time, boss.

NOAH LITTLEJOHN.

Confident that Jeffrey Deville would not start for the Peddler's Crutch for some time yet, Noah had hopes that some one would go to Spruce and get the letter before the departure. It was time for the members of Tyrone's remote clan to make a trip with pack animals to Spruce for their winter's supply of store provisions.

The letter mailed, Noah returned to his room, and, having no further business in San Francisco, packed his belongings and went to the railway station and patiently waited for a train.

Next morning he arrived at Porcupine and took up temporary residence in the miserable little hotel, clinging precariously to the side of a rocky hill, and operated by Ralph Pearl, the man who kept the general store and post office.

Here he waited, as patiently as ever, for the coming of Jeffrey Deville.

CHAPTER XI

"SUPPOSIN' "

Two weeks had passed before Jeffrey Deville stepped from the train to the depot platform at Porcupine, glanced at the heap of baggage that had been shoved unceremoniously on a hand truck, and looked about him. He drew in his breath, straightened his shoulders, and smiled with anticipation as he sniffed the scent of pines and noted the white crests of the distant, snow-capped mountains.

He was the only passenger to alight at the little station. There were a few loungers about, who had walked to the depot to see the train come in, and a bustling, fidgety little gray man who was throwing a lean mail sack into a little pushcart. He was entirely toothless, and when he spoke in answer to Jeff's questions his pointed gray beard bobbed up and down comically.

"Yes, I reckon ye c'n get a lotta guides 'round here," he opined. "Wanta go to th' upper waters o' th' Pipe-organ, eh? Some trip! They's been a fella hangin' round here for two weeks now. I heerd him tellin' the boys a lotta times in my store that he knows th' upper reaches o' the Pipe-organ country like a book. He'd be a good one to get, and he ain't workin'. Said his name was John Little. I reckon— But here's the son-of-a-gun now. Hey, Little! Want a job as guide to th' upper Pipe-organ? Here's a gent wants to lose 'imself up in there."

There slouched toward Jeffrey Deville a tall mountaineer with faded blue eyes, hair as coarse and straight and colorless as hay, a ghost-white face that looked as if it had been skinned with a knife, and lower eyelids that hung down, exposing their tender inner sides, which were inflamed and red.

"Great guns!" gasped Jeffrey.

"He ain't much to look at, fer a fact," admitted Ralph Pearl, the gray little storekeeper. "But I guess he knows th' country, though I don't know where he come from. Might have a talk with 'im, anyway."

"Howdy?" drawled Noah Littlejohn, alias John Little, as he came close to the two and stopped. "What's that I heered about th' upper Pipe-organ, Mr. Pearl?"

Jeffrey answered the question. "I want to go up there," he said, "and I'm looking for a guide. My name is Jeffrey Deville. I'm from San Francisco. Do you know the country?"

"Humph! There ain't another man livin' that knows it like I do."

"That sounds encouraging. What took you up there, may I ask?"

"Prospectin'. Nobody ever goes in fer anythin' else, Mr.—Deville, did ye say?"

"Yes, Deville."

"I'm John Little, prospector. I got a little sick on my way down to Sacramento, and I laid off here fer a spell to rest up. I was gonna leave to-morrow on th' nine o'clock. But if they's any chanst o' takin' ye to th' upper Pipe-organ I could wait. I got nothin' to do perticular. I was gonna make it for th' mines up about Chico, and see if I couldn't get a job. But I'd rather keep on top o' th' ground if it'll pay me. Jest what was ye wantin', Mr. Deville?"

"I want to go to the upper Pipe-organ as soon as

possible,” the young man replied. “I want a guide and, if I can get them, a couple of miners—fellows who understand taking ore samples, you know. There are some claims up there that I want to investigate.”

“I reckon I’m th’ man fer ye, Mr. Deville. And I guess Mr. Pearl, here, could get a couple o’ miners. F’r that matter, ye wouldn’t need any. I c’n take all th’ samples ye want.”

“I’ll be in something of a hurry,” Jeff explained, looking the man over critically and gaining no new pleasure in knowing him. “I’ll want two good miners besides a guide and cook and camp roustabout combined. Can you cook?”

“Of course!” sneered Littlejohn disgustedly. “And I’ll ’tend to yer pack outfit, take yer samples, and—”

“I have been instructed to get a couple of miners to take the samples,” Jeffrey interposed curtly. “You’ll guide us to our destination, cook for us, and take care of the mules. I’ll attend to everything else without suggestions from anybody. I’ve been told that it ought to be an easy matter to find men at Porcupine who can take samples of gold ore. Can you recommend anybody, Mr. Pearl?”

“Yes, sev’r’l. There’s Dennis Grinnell and Art Carey. They ain’t workin’ now; I reckon they’d be glad to go. I know I’d be glad to see ’em make a little piece o’ money. I’m gettin’ tired feedin’ ’em outa my store.”

“Thank you,” said Jeff. “Will you put me in touch with them? I’m to stop at your hotel until I’m ready for the start, I understand. I’ll buy the greater part of my provisions for the trip from you, too. Then how about pack animals?”

“Any amount of good mountain mules round here, Mr. Deville. Ye could hire all ye want, if ye’ll put up a reasonable deposit with the owners.”

"I'll do so willingly," Jeff returned. "And now, if you'll get this stuff of mine up to the hotel, I'll walk there with Mr. Little and talk things over."

"John Little" wanted ten dollars a day and found for guiding Jeffrey Deville to the north bend of the Pipe-organ. This seemed a reasonable figure, and, after a little deliberation, Jeffrey engaged him for the trip.

That afternoon Art Carey and Dennis Grinnell came to the hotel, and Jeffrey talked with them in the office. They looked honest, half shiftless, powerful, and reasonably intelligent, so Jeff closed with them at ten dollars a day and board. They agreed to engage six good pack mules for the trip, the owners of which would later report to Jeffrey for the deposit money which would guarantee their safe return.

At nine o'clock Jeffrey Deville turned in, well pleased with the result of his preliminary efforts.

Two days later at daybreak they set off, four men and six lean mules, the latter heavily laden. They passed through the Sulphur Mountains, crossed the upper end of Contrary Creek, negotiated Bullbat Divide, between Grandstone Mountain and Gravestone Mountain, and made camp for the night on the Avocet River.

From the Avocet, next morning, they followed Brown Woman Creek, swung to the northeast and went through the pass between Skull Hill and Ringbone Mountain. In the heart of a deep forest country the guide directed the party into the northwest again. They crossed Ten Oaks Creek, and camped by a spring halfway between the creek and the Paddlefish River.

It was evident that the man called John Little knew just where he was going, though it turned out that he was not much of a hiker. In fact, he did little better than Jeffrey, upon whose newly knitted legbone the

strain of the trip was beginning to tell. So they pressed forward slowly but surely into the vast wilderness before them, which was much to Jeffrey’s liking.

They wormed their slow way across Coonskin Valley to the headwaters of the Stranger. Lodgeman’s Pass put them through the Stranger Mountains. John Little halted the outfit at the northern end of the pass. He pointed ahead toward two snow-capped mountains that gleamed hazily in the distance.

“That’s the Peddler’s Crutch,” he said. “Beyond it is the lower bend of the Pipe-organ. We’re gettin’ along. We’ll reach the Crutch by to-morrow night, I’m thinkin’.”

Jeffrey Deville thrilled at the sight and the knowledge that his great adventure was slowly taking definite shape.

True enough, they reached the divide about five o’clock on the following afternoon. They passed through it and camped in the northern portals. In the distance, across a deeply wooded valley, they glimpsed the greenish gleam of the lower Pipe-organ.

“One more day’s hike,” prophesied John Little, “and we’ll be there. To-morrow night will see us camped on the banks of the upper bend.”

He was lying stretched out beside the glowing camp fire. Dennis Grinnell and Art Carey sat in silence, smoking their pipes, watching the flames. The cold night was closing in about them. Jeffrey was watching John Little.

The man interested him peculiarly, he could not say just why. His strange, peeled face, the ghostly color of it, the sagging, houndlike eyes, and the straight, wispy hair were all more or less repulsive; but there was something oddly fascinating about that face.

“I been thinkin’ to-night,” said John Little suddenly,

with his scheming, skim-milk eyes anywhere but on Jeffrey's face, "about a fella that I knew once, who prospected a lot in this country. He was a pretty slick customer. Never knew his name—or else I've forgot it. Workin' at th' time down at Tyrone Ranch, some fifty or sixty mile to th' south o' where we're at now. He drifted through there one day, and said he'd made a rich strike in th' Pipe-organ country. Showed some mighty fine samples of ore, too, by golly! But wait'll I tell ye:

"It went on and on, and I didn't see any more of 'im. Then one day a bunch of fellas come through th' ranch, all fitted out for a long stay somewheres. Ast 'em where they was headin' fer, and they said th' Pipe-organ country.

"Well, that was all right. So pretty soon one of 'em tells me how he'd met a fella in San José who'd showed him some mighty fine samples o' gold ore, and he finished up by tellin' me he was on his way, with maps and ever'thin', to investigate these here claims. He had money to invest in minin' claims, he said, and if these turned out all right he was gonna take hold of 'em. Th' rest o' th' bunch that was with 'im was miners, he said. Personally, he didn't know nothin' at all about gold deposits and things like that.

"Well, they mosied on into th' Pipe-organ country; and it went on and on, and finally they come back with their samples. And this sucker that was gonta invest his money was all fussed up. They hurried through and went on down to Frisco, or San José, or some place, and I didn't hear anythin' more of 'em fer quite a spell. Then one day back they come, and I had another talk with this jasper.

"He said that th' samples assayed fine, and he was tickled to death. Th' bird that had located th' claims was with 'em this time. They beat it on through, and

it went on and on till it was pretty near a year before I heard anythin’ more about th’ deal.

“Then I was down in Frisco one time, and I happened to meet this fella that had put up th’ money on th’ street.

“Say, wasn’t he one sick hombre? He looked it, too. He told me all how he’d gone up in there, done a lot of assessment work, and started in to build a wagon road to th’ claims. He was satisfied, then, that this fella who’d located ’em was all O. K., so he’d up and trusted him with about ten thousan’ dollars, to be used in buildin’ th’ road. Then that bird up and vanished, and left ’im holdin’ th’ sack.

“And th’ claims had turned out to be next to worthless. Ye see, th’ miners that this prospector had sent with this bird were friends o’ his. They’d get hold o’ th’ samples they’d taken while this fella was asleep, and salted ’em a plenty. It was th’ same old game, but this tricky prospector had played it a little different.

“Ye see, he never even tried to sell his claims. He wanted a partner, he did. He had refused even to go along with th’ sucker when he went up into th’ Pipe-organ country to investigate. See how slick he was? And th’ fella that was stung, he told me he never suspected th’ birds that went along with ’im. Thought he’d picked ’em ’imself, by accident, and that th’ prospector didn’t know who was in th’ party. Just th’ same, this grafter had worked it so he got friends of his to attend to that little business, and th’ sucker he never got on.

“So when th’ samples turned out all right, this fella got a lotta confidence in th’ prospector, and it wasn’t no time till he’d advanced somethin’ like ten thousan’ dollars fer this fella to use in buildin’ th’ road.

“It was a pretty slick game, all right. This pros-

pector he's got a way about 'im that makes everybody trust 'im. Looks innocent, ye know, and he seems like a good fella—good natured and all. Everybody likes 'im till they git onto 'im. He takes his time and don't grab ever'thin' in sight th' first rattle outa th' box. He makes everythin' look square and aboveboard until he gains a fella's confidence. Then he rampses 'em. Funny I can't remember his name. Maybe I never heard it."

Jeffrey Deville's face was a trifle pale. His lips were set. He watched John Little closely, but the bloodhound eyes continued to gaze absently at the camp fire, and there was a little reminiscent smile on the lips of the ghost-faced guide.

"Bein' on this here trip," John Little continued, "kinda made me think o' that, Mr. Deville. O' course I don't know anythin' about yer business, and don't want to. I'm jest supposin'. Now, say you'd met a prospector in Frisco, we'll say, who put a proposition up to ye somethin' like I jest been tellin' about. Say this bird who told ye about th' gold ast ye to go up into th' Pipe-organ country and investigate ever'thin' thorough. 'To convince ye that I'm square,' maybe he says, 'I won't go along at all. I'll stick here in Frisco and wait fer ye to come back with yer samples. Furthermore,' maybe he'll say, 'I won't have anythin' to do with th' deal at all. I know a lotta good miners I could send along with ye to help ye get yer ore samples, but I won't mention 'em. Ye might think I was payin' 'em to make th' samples assay good—salt 'em. So I won't name a soul.

"'You jest go to Porcupine and tell 'em there what ye want. They's a lotta minin' men around there. Get any of 'em to go with ye. Pick yer own men. Go get yer samples, bring 'em to th' city, and have 'em assayed. Then if ye're satisfied I'm square and above-

board, and ye wanta get in on th' ground floor with me, we'll talk turkey.' "

"Almost the exact words of Lin Columbia," was running through the mind of Jeffrey Deville.

"Well, ye go to Porcupine," John Little continued. "Ye look around a little and ye pick up a couple o' minin' men. Now, I'm jest supposin', gents, and I don't want anybody to take offense. So jest supposin' these gentlemen here, Mr. Grinnell and Mr. Carey, was old-time friends o' this bird ye're dealin' with. Say he sent 'em a wire, or wrote 'em, maybe, tellin' 'em to be on th' lookout fer ye, and to be sure an' get th' job. So these gentlemen, they go along, get at th' samples ye've taken while ye're asleep, and salt 'em well. And ye'd never guess they were in with th' grafter ye'd met in Frisco, would ye?"

"Perhaps not," said Jeffrey guardedly.

"Well, they ain't nothin' like that in this case," piped up Art Carey. "Neither me ner Dennis knew what Mr. Deville wanted with us when the postmaster told us to go see 'im at th' hotel."

"I ain't sayin' they *is* anythin' like that in this case," protested John Little. "I told ye I was jest supposin', because this here proposition is so much like th' one I was tellin' ye about—or could be. But now looky here again: Supposin' that old whiskered guy that runs th' store an' post office an' th' hotel—what's his name?"

"Ralph Pearl," Dennis Grinnell supplied.

"Sure—Mr. Pearl. Jest supposin' *he* was in on th' deal, too. That *could* be, couldn't it? Course it could! Supposin' he was in, and you two gents also. He'd be th' one to get ye to go to Mr. Deville, wouldn't he? Jest like he did. And that would make it look all right, because he's a prominent citizen and postmaster, and all that."

"And how about yerself?" asked Art Carey, a trifle belligerently. "Maybe you could be crooked, too. Wasn't it Ralph Pearl that interdooced ye to Mr. Deville when he said he wanted a guide?"

"'Course it could," agreed the peeled-faced man. "But ye know—both o' ye—that I don't belong about Porcupine. I didn't even know you gents' names before we started. Seen ye a lotta times at th' store, though, o' course."

"But Mr. Deville don't know that," said Carey.

"That's so, fer a fact"—and John Little grinned painfully, as if the joke were on him after all. "I guess I'd better close my trap. Well, anyway, I was jest supposin'. I guess Mr. Deville ain't got anythin' to worry about."

"No," said Jeffrey after a pause, "I don't think that I have. I got a few suggestions from the assayer who handled the samples from the claims that I am going to see. I think I know how to get to San Francisco the fresh samples that I'll take without anybody getting the chance to salt them."

"Well and good," quoth John Little. "I hope ye have. And I'll say there's rich gold on the upper Pipe-organ. Personally, I hope ye make a million dollars outa this here deal. I hadn't oughta said what I did, maybe. But this here trip, bein' so much like that other one that I knew about, got me to thinkin'."

Ten minutes of silence followed. All four men smoked placidly and rested from their grilling walk of the day. Close at hand the weary mules crunched the feed in their nose bags contentedly.

"What did this fellow look like?" asked Jeffrey suddenly.

John Little started, as if rudely awakened from deep thoughts.

"Eh? What'd ye say, Mr. Deville?"

"I say, what did this fellow look like?"

"What fella?"

"The prospector who beat the come-on out of ten thousand dollars."

"Oh! I was thinkin' about somethin' that happened a thousan' miles from here, when I was punchin' cows over in Idaho one time. Why, le'me see. He was kinda young, and he'd been around a lot. Kinda educated, too. Talked kinda half rough-neck and half civilized. Somethin' of a rider, if I remember right. Always braggin' about how he could stick on bad ones, anyway. But, by thunder, I can't remember jest what that boy looked like. Blue eyes, though, if I ain't mistaken. Kinda trustin' eyes. Oh, he was an actor, all right, fer th' fella that he snared wasn't anybody's fool.

"And, say! I remember now that he had a way o' duckin' his head forward and lookin' up at a body like he was peekin' at 'im from under a fence or somethin'. Yes, that makes me remember that his eyes were blue. I heard afterward he'd pulled that trick sev'r'l 'times and got away with it. Oh, he was a slick *hombre*, all right!"

"Thanks," muttered Jeffrey. "Well, good night, fellows—I think I'll hit the hay."

CHAPTER XII

UNBROKEN SEALS

EARLY in the afternoon of the following day they forded the lower bend of the Pipe-organ and crossed Lost Squaw Valley. As night descended they went into permanent camp at the mouth of Vaulted Cañon, on the north bend of the long sought river.

That night, while his three companions slept, Jeffrey Deville sat in his little tent and reviewed the instructions given him by the San Francisco assayer to whom he had shown Lin Columbia's samples. This man, at one time an experienced prospector himself, had given Jeff several valuable suggestions. Jeff had had no suspicions regarding the integrity of Lin Columbia until he had listened to John Little's story the night before. Just the same, on the advice of the assayer, he had taken steps to protect himself. In his above-board, trusting way, he had scouted the idea of Columbia being anything but straight. But finally the assayer had prevailed upon him to take no chances, and had cited many cases in his own experience wherein greenhorns like himself had been completely taken in.

So now Jeffrey took from his belongings the two stout leather bags that he had brought along in which to carry the samples back to San Francisco. At the assayer's suggestion, he had had them made especially for the task to be imposed upon them.

The seams were machine-stitched, with the hair

sides of the pieces of leather placed together. Then the bags had been turned inside out so that no stitching showed from the outside. In place of draw-strings, the bags were supplied with metal clasps, to which were soldered staples that fitted in slots. Jeff had two small brass padlocks, of a well-made, expensive pattern, which would be extremely difficult to pick. When these were snapped in the staples he imagined that it would be a difficult matter for any one to get at the samples in the bags and salt them.

And as a further precaution, he had brought along a quantity of sealing wax. On his finger was a large signet ring, bearing his family crest. Over the locks, after they had been snapped in the staples, he meant to pour the melted wax and affix his seal. So it seemed an absolute impossibility for anybody to meddle with the contents of those bags without his knowledge. For to cut the stitching would be a foolish proceeding. It could not be done without his notice, since the stitching was hidden inside, and any restitching that would be done would of necessity be outside work.

Next morning, after a great deal of difficulty, they located Flytrap Cañon. The miners went to work that afternoon, crawling over the face of the ledge and chipping ceaselessly.

Next day they were at it again, working up and down the cañon, taking samples wherever possible, chipping, chipping all day long. Day after day they kept it up, Jeffrey keeping strict tab on the work and labeling everything carefully, following the instructions given him by both Lin and the assayer.

Toward the close of the third day Jeffrey, working over a certain portion of the samples taken, which were heaped up in the center of a square of canvas, saw a shadow fall upon the white cloth. Looking up quickly, he saw the guide, John Little, standing and observing

him gravely. Up until now Little had remained in camp, attending to the cooking and caring for the stock.

"Well?" said Jeff, a trifle snappily. "Did you want something, Little?"

"Oh, no—nothin' at all," said Little, with his ghostly grin. "Jest thought I'd ramble up in here and see how things was goin'."

"Well, they're going all right," retorted Jeffrey. "I didn't know you knew where we were working."

"I didn't," Little replied, "until, wanderin' up th' main cañon, huntin' fer th' mules, I heard yer miners chippin'. Ye c'n hear a long ways in these woods on a still day. So I jest thought I'd—"

"Nose in," supplied Jeffrey grimly.

"Well, they ain't no harm in that, is they, Mr. Deville?"

"Perhaps not. But you are being paid as guide, cook, and wrangler. Your services aren't needed here. And, by the way, how came it to be necessary to hunt for the mules in Vaulted Cañon? Why should they wander up there? Nothing for them to eat."

"Oh, they had their bellies full, I guess, and was jest moseyin' about."

"I don't believe that," muttered Jeffrey to himself. But aloud he said: "Well, we'll be through for to-day shortly. Better be going back to camp and getting supper ready, Little."

"Sure thing," replied Noah, and turned to go.

The man with the bloodhound eyes chuckled softly to himself as he crossed through the lane cut in the chaparral to Vaulted Cañon. One part of his stealthy mission in the Pipe-organ country had been accomplished. He knew the location of Lin Columbia's claims. His boss, Ozias Tyrone, would be well satisfied with

that, even though Noah should fail in the second task to which he had set his ingenuity.

Finally there came a day when Jeff decided that he had taken all the samples that was necessary. He had carefully followed all instructions as to division and pulverizing, and now the samples were in the leather bags. He gave orders that night to break camp next morning.

He sat up to a late hour in his own little tent. He had locked the bags and hidden the keys on his person. He had melted the sealing wax and poured it generously over the padlocks. Directly over the keyholes of the locks he had pressed his moistened signet ring in the yielding wax. The impression left was perfect. When he at last turned in the bags served as pillows under his head.

Early the following morning they were off on the backward trail to civilization. It was necessary, of course, for the heavy bags to be placed in the pack, so temporarily they were out of Jeffrey's sight. But he was not worrying about them. It seemed an utter impossibility for any one to tamper with the contents of those leather pokes without his knowledge. He did not know, however, that the protective measures he had adopted were not new. Nor did he realize that the man whom he had employed as guide had come prepared for an attempt to outwit him.

They had crossed the lower Pipe-organ, passed through the Peddler's Crutch, and were in camp for the night in Lodgeman's Pass before anything occurred that looked suspicious.

Jeffrey was asleep in his tent. Under his head were the two bags, lying side by side, with a blanket spread over them. A slight movement under his head awakened him instantly. He had the presence of mind, despite his drowsiness, to lie perfectly still and wait.

The tent flaps were parted; moonlight was streaming in. A long wait followed the first movement. Then it came again, stealthy, slow. Jeffrey felt one of the bags being cautiously dragged from under his head.

He was on the point of reaching for his automatic pistol and springing to his feet, when suddenly another plan occurred to him. He waited until he felt the bag being moved a third time, then turned over, moaned softly as if slightly disturbed in his sleep, and rolled his head completely off the bag.

He now lay silent for perhaps a minute, then began feigning a soft snore. Instantly he felt the bag moving again. It did not cease to move this time, and presently the young man knew that it had been dragged under the tent wall completely outside.

For nearly an hour, as he judged, he lay there wide awake, wondering what was to happen next. Then, in the moonlight, he saw a hand reaching in and crossing his line of vision.

The hand disappeared; then came the bag, a black bulk in the pale light. Stealthily it was replaced, and the blanket was softly pulled up over it again.

Jeffrey stirred, tossed about a little, and once more changed position so that whoever was interesting himself in his affairs might have his chance at the second bag. But for a long time nothing happened.

Jeff smiled to himself and thought: "Guess he's given it up as a bad job. Found there was no way to get into the first bag, and assumes that the other one is protected the same way."

His thoughts grew bitter. The guide, John Little, had been right. Lin Columbia was trying to play him for a sucker, and the two miners of the party were in his employ. He sighed deeply, forgetting that he was still on watch. He had liked Lin Columbia immensely.

Too bad! But of course everything was over between them now.

He realized as he lay there that he was not feeling well. He had not felt just right, he remembered now, since supper. And how drowsy he was becoming! Had he been doped? Had it taken all this time since the meal for the drug to take effect? Surely it was close to midnight.

He felt for and found his flashlight. He moved the lever; a disk of brilliancy trembled over the tent wall. He took out his watch and held it in the light.

The time was only sixteen minutes to eight!

Quite unexpectedly the electric torch dropped from his listless hand just after he had turned off the light. He heaved one long sigh, tried to rouse himself, and sank back on one arm.

He must shake this off! Whatever drug he had been given in his food was just beginning to take effect. His was a powerful constitution. Also he had eaten a heavy meal after the long day's tramp. The drug was only just beginning to work on his system.

He raised himself halfway to a sitting posture once more. But his head swam round and round, and he pitched over sidewise to lie without a move.

He knew nothing more until he heard John Little calling him to breakfast. He felt faint and nauseated, but believed that the fresh mountain air would soon revive him. He must act naturally, anyway. He carefully examined both leather pokes. The wax was as he had left it. There was not one crack showing in the wax on either lock. The seals were intact. He chuckled a little foolishly.

"Guess I got 'em," he told himself. "They saw it was useless to try to get into the bags without my finding it out, so they gave it up entirely."

They were six or more miles from camp before his

brain was clear enough for him to realize that, in his drugged condition, the keys might have been taken from his pocket and later replaced; that the signet ring might have been slipped from his finger and a new impression made with it in new wax. How stupid he had been! And then he remembered a peculiar little blowhole that had hardened in the wax that covered one of the locks. If that blowhole still showed he could be positive that the seals had not been tampered with. But he could not investigate until nighttime came again.

That day seemed a long one, but at last they were in camp once more, on Ten Oaks Creek. Jeffrey was not afraid of being doped again that evening, so he ate heartily, as usual. As soon as darkness settled down he repaired to his tent, with the precious bags under his arm. He extinguished his light shortly, but did not lie down for fear of falling asleep. Two hours later, when all was silent about the camp, he looked out, saw nothing moving and lighted his candle.

The first seal that he examined showed the selfsame blowhole, undisturbed, that he had noticed after completing the sealing of the bags.

"By golly, they didn't make it!" he muttered. "They didn't have the sense to take the ring off my finger and try to fake the seals. They saw that their case was hopeless, so, rather than start a row, they did nothing at all. I've got you, Mr. Columbia! We'll see what the assayer has to say about the ore from your wonderful claims. And then—then perhaps I'll hurt you—when your leg is well again."

He sat staring into the blackness. There is no pain like that of learning suddenly that one whom we wish to call friend is in reality an enemy.

In the course of time the weary pack train wove its way to Porcupine, where Jeffrey paid his debts to the

guide and the miners, and, with his sealed bags in a trunk, took train for San Francisco.

When he reached the city he did not go to his hotel at once, nor did he call up Agnes on the telephone to let her know that he had returned. He took lodgings in a hotel close to the office of the assayer, to whom he had taken the samples immediately after his arrival. Next morning he would hear from the assayer's lips what he already believed—that the samples were worthless. Columbia's tools had done their best to salt the contents of the leather bags and had failed. Therefore the bags were filled with next to valueless ore.

He slept fitfully that night. Time and time again he awoke and stared up toward the invisible ceiling, utterly miserable. On the morrow he was to lose a friend—would be obliged to forever shut out from his life the genial man for whom he had formed a sudden and great affection. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. After his visit to the assayer's he would immediately look up Lin Columbia and—well, he did not know just what he would do.

Daylight came at last. He left his bed, went down in the street, walked about a bit with his hands behind his back, then sought a restaurant. He could not eat over a few mouthfuls at best. His cigar tasted like old rope. He cursed a newsboy who came to his table with a bunch of papers and a pleading look. He glanced at his watch, paid his bill hurriedly, forgot to tip the waiter, and hastened out. Ten minutes later he presented himself in the office of the assayer.

The man looked up at him and smiled, slowly shaking his head.

"Well?" snapped Jeffrey.

"No good, sir," came the expected reply. "A little gold shows—nothing to speak of. If you took your

samples as I told you to, the lode that you took them from is worthless."

"I took them as you told me to," said Jeffrey in a tired voice. "What's the damage?" And he reached into his pocket for his purse.

CHAPTER XIII.

"A LADY TO SEE YOU, SIR"

WHEN Jeffrey Deville left the assay office, after learning that the samples of ore which he had brought from the Pipe-organ were worthless, he immediately engaged a taxicab to take him to the St. Ignatius Hotel. But just as he was stepping into the car a hand slapped him familiarly on the shoulder. He turned and looked into the grinning countenance of Tom Coburn, an old-time friend.

"You're already dressed for the part," said Coburn. "Where you been? What's the idea of the canvas clothes and everything?"

"I've been up-country on a little outing," replied Jeffrey. "What do you mean, dressed for the part?"

"You're going duck hunting with us, young fella," his friend told him. "We had the gang all lined up, and everything's ready, and at the last moment Henry McDade dropped out. They've just brought in a new oil well in which Henry is interested, and he's all fussed up and won't go. Come on, Jeff. You're all dressed for hunting. The machines are ready; there are plenty of guns. Just hop in and beat it."

"Who all's in the party?" asked Jeffrey, glad for an excuse to postpone his business with Lin Columbia until he had had time to think.

"Oh, Julius Bethany, Frank Jennings, and Jimmy Chapman. Come one. Be a sport. You know you

haven't anything to do. We're going up the Sacramento River. Be gone about four days. You can just jump into Henry's place, use his guns and things, and we won't lose a minute. We're all ready to start."

"You're on," said Jeffrey. "Lead me to it."

Four more days had passed, then, before he once more stepped into a taxicab in San Francisco and bade the driver take him to the St. Ignatius Hotel. Never before in his life had he felt so miserable as when he reached his destination and passed through the lobby to the elevator doors.

He would see his sister first, he told himself, and afterward look up Lin Columbia. He wanted to talk with Agnes before facing the man who had tried to deceive him. Agnes was cool-headed and serene. Furthermore, Jeffrey knew that she liked Lin immensely. Yes, he would see her before going to Lin. She could advise him. He would look up his one-time friend that afternoon.

These thoughts raced through his mind as the elevator glided noiselessly to his floor. He stepped out in the softly carpeted hall and soon was pressing the button beside a door of his own apartment.

Agnes's maid answered the ring. Jeffrey smiled wanly at the girl as her eyes lighted up in greeting. Dressed just as he had been when he returned to Porcupine, he stepped inside.

"Please tell my sister that I am back, Florence," he said.

"She's dressing," replied the girl. "I'll tell her at once."

She disappeared, and Jeffrey passed through the entry and into the large living room of the suite.

He moved toward a deep davenport, and was about to sink into it when a head appeared above the back of one of the large, overstuffed chairs. Next instant

Jeffrey Deville was looking straight into the smiling blue eyes of Lin Columbia, who had been lolling low in the chair, deep in a book.

"Well, for the love of Michelangelo!" gasped the "child of the boundless West." "Has my brain got a whim storm, or do I see what I think I see? Jeffrey, old chuckawalla, are you there? Don't fade out! Speak to me!"

Lin Columbia had risen awkwardly to his feet. He took in hand a cane that leaned against his chair. One hop and he was before Jeffrey Deville, with a hand outstretched in welcome, his head jounced forward, his eyes looking up with that droll expression that Jeffrey knew so well. It maddened Jeffrey. Had Lin showed any mannerisms with which Jeffrey was not so familiar, he might have controlled his temper. But the mere fact that Lin Columbia was acting just as Lin Columbia was expected to act seemed more than the man from the Pipe-organ could bear.

He wanted to love this fellow, and now it was his duty to hate him. This maddened him more than anything else. The blood rushed to his face and he cried out heatedly:

"What are you doing here? What business have you to come here and bother my sister? Get out before I kick you out, you—you dirty swindler!"

The lower jaw of Lin Columbia sagged down suddenly and his innocent-looking blue eyes grew big and round. For a moment or two he stood in that forward-bent position, looking up in complete mystification. Then suddenly his expression changed. He stood erect.

"Well," he drawled, "I'm beginning to contract the hunch that our delicate little pattern has suddenly been smeared up a bit. But, to answer your question, I'll say that I came here at your sister's invitation. We were goin' for a horseback ride in Golden Gate Park.

But if you're gonta get peeved, Jeff, and kick me out, I guess we'll have to postpone the little celebration."

He came to a pause and looked Jeffrey Deville straight in the eye. His lips straightened.

"I reckon reason has descended from your mezzanine floor, Jeff," he said whimsically. "Sit down and tell mamma all about it."

"Don't shoot that nonsense at me!" raged Jeffrey. "I'm through with you forever. When I went into the Pipe-organ Country I hadn't the slightest notion of mistrusting you. If your samples had panned out well, I shouldn't have hesitated an instant to advance you any reasonable amount of money at my command with which to begin development of your claims. I would have been an easy mark, I'll admit. But your scheme failed, Columbia. Dennis Grinnell and Art Carey weren't able to get at my samples and salt them with gold without my knowing it. You're a fake—a rascal—a swindler! Get out of my apartment immediately!"

Lin lifted his cane and thoughtfully examined the crooked handle. His blue eyes were far-away and dreamy. The ghost of a smile played across his lips.

"Well, are you going?" demanded Jeffrey.

Lin looked at him, and the smile deepened.

"Oh, no," he said—"not yet. You mustn't pout, Jeffrey. You're a big boy now. Sit down and smoke one of your own cigars. They're good, I can assure you. You and I are going to have a little talk."

"We are not! Go—beat it!"

"Listen," said Lin. "Just chisel this on your grandmother's tombstone: I am not going to let you bully me and drive me out of your own apartment. I like your chairs and I like your cigars. I have invited you to share them with me. Sit down—we're going to have a talk."

"Columbia, I positively won't stand for such impudence!" gritted Jeffrey. "I—"

"Didn't the samples assay to suit you?" interrupted Lin.

"No! Of course they didn't! Grinnel and Carey weren't able to salt them because I locked the bags, poured wax over the locks, and made impressions in the wax with my signet ring. So, rather than show themselves up, they didn't try to salt the contents of the bags. They examined them, left them alone, and put the matter up to you. Haven't you had a wire from them to that effect?"

"Not yet," drawled Lin. "And the funny part of it is that I've never before heard of these two comedians. Do sit down and have a talk with me. I want to hear all about your trip."

"I won't sit down, I tell you! Nor will I be ridiculed in my own home. But I'll stand here and tell you just what took place. I feel like getting it off my chest, anyway. You'll listen and go."

"Oh, sure," muttered Lin. "But I'd much prefer sitting down."

This speech Jeffrey ignored entirely. He began his story at the point where he met the postmaster of Porcupine, and told everything that had occurred up until he stepped through the door of his suite in the St. Ignatius Hotel.

The eyes of Lin Columbia narrowed as the story progressed. The smile continued to play about his lips from time to time, but he offered no comment whatever. When Jeffrey finished and drew in his lips with grim seriousness Lin asked:

"You're sure that you took the samples as I directed you to? You went all over the lode from end to end?"

"I did, positively."

"And your samples showed no gold whatever?"

"None to speak of. They're worthless."

"This guide, Jeffrey? What did he look like?"

Jeffrey described the peculiar whiteness and the peeled look of Noah Littlejohn's face.

Then Lin laughed outright. More than that, he wheeled his chair about and sank into it, deliberately crossing his legs. Jeffrey glared at him, but for some strange reason he was eager to hear what he had to say, and seemed to have forgotten for the time being that he had ordered him out.

"Sit down and light up," suggested Lin. "We've just gotta have an *habla* now, brother. I know that peeled-faced man. *He* salted your samples. And this makes one of the funniest cases of salting that I've ever heard about. Listen, fellow orphan: that peeled-faced guide of yours is named Noah Littlejohn; and, in some way, he took the gold-bearing samples from your bags and substituted worthless rock-dust."

"Ridiculous!" stormed Jeffrey. "Who ever heard of such a thing? Why should he do that?"

"To make it appear that my claims are no good," said Lin. "To keep you from investing money in assessment work. To cause the assessment work to lapse, so that he and his boss can get in and jump my claims. Winter is close at hand—it's on, in fact, up there. I am a temporary cripple. If that assessment work isn't done right away, there'll be no opportunity for me to do it before my year is out. Then they'll jump the claims. Man, can't you see it?"

For a long time Jeffrey Deville stared coldly at Lin Columbia. Then he said slowly:

"Columbia, I admire your nerve and your clever brains. Nobody else on earth could have made such a magnificent effort to wriggle out of an impossible situation. But it won't work. I'm no fool, if I am

green at the mining game. Please go now, before I lose my temper entirely."

Lin rose to his feet. He looked sorrowfully at his friend for an instant, then turned toward the entrance.

"I have no more to say," he stated. "I have showed you the scintillating synopsis of this hectic program from beginning to end, but your eyes are full of mud-puppies and you can't see. I expected you to believe me, Jeff, because—well, just because I wanted you to believe me, I guess. I like you, and I always will like you. If you can't take a chance on me just because I'm Lin Columbia—well, then you can't. Shake hands? No? Well, so long, then. I won't wait to tell your sister good-by, if you'll say it to her for me."

Jeffrey's head was bowed. He did not look up—refused, even, to say good-by. Lin watched him a moment, shrugged, smiled, and started toward the entrance.

The maid came in. "Miss Deville will be out in a minute," she said, looking at Jeffrey.

Jeffrey nodded his head, and Lin, who had hesitated slightly, started forward again.

The doorbell rang. The maid slipped silently past the outgoing man and into the entryway. As Lin, walking slowly because of his injured leg, reached the living room door, the maid appeared again.

"There's a lady to see you, sir," she said to Jeffrey.

"Who is she?" asked Jeffrey in a listless tone.

"Miss Joyce Larue, sir—and she says she's from a place called Tyrone Ranch."

"Find out what she wants, please," Jeffrey ordered.

Lin paused, looked back, and grinned. Then deliberately he hobbled back to his chair, while Jeffrey watched him in amazement. He sank into the chair, crossed his legs.

"I've decided to have that little talk with you, after

all," he said. "We'll hear what Miss Larue from Tyrone Ranch has to say about the peeled-faced man. Miss Larue has come to bring you to your senses, and I wanta stick around and hear the *mestiza* talk. Did you ever see anybody so hard to shake as I am, old friend of my one-legged days?"

CHAPTER XIV.

PARTNERS

JEFFREY DEVILLE and Lin Columbia uttered not a word as they awaited the reappearance of the maid. She came presently. "She says her business with you is private, sir," she told her employer.

"Show her in, please," Lin Columbia piped up.

Jeffrey frowned at him, but made no open protest.

The girl from Tyrone Ranch came in a trifle hesitatingly, but for all of that she was self-possessed and not afraid. The maid had barely announced her when Lin got to his feet and stepped forward, before Jeffrey could make a move.

"Hello, *mestiza*," he greeted her familiarly.

Her hazel eyes grew round. Sudden color swept her face.

"Why—why, Lin!" she gasped. "I thought—"

"Don't think, *mestiza*. Terrible strain. Thinking will make a pessimist out of you, maybe."

He took her brown hand in his, squeezed it a little more firmly than was absolutely necessary, and swung about to the blank-faced Deville.

"Jeff," he said, "kindly step forward and be presented to Miss Joyce Larue, of Tyrone Ranch, between the lower Pipe-organ and the Stranger. Miss Larue, permit me to present Mr. Jeffrey Deville, my partner in the mining game."

"Why—why, that's just what I came to see Mr. Deville about," said Joyce, glancing in wonder at the dark young man who kept his distance from her and bowed without enthusiasm.

"Oh, I know that," Lin chirruped. "Nothing else could have brought you here. What puzzles me, though, is how you learned that Jeffrey is my partner in the venture."

"I beg your pardon, but—" Jeffrey began stiffly.

"Not granted," retorted Lin Columbia, with a boyish grin. "Miss Larue, kindly be seated and tell Mr. Deville what Noah Littlejohn had to say to your stepfather when he returned from the upper Pipe-organ country."

"How did you know anything about it?" marveled Joyce.

"Intuition, I guess. Noah drifted back to Tyrone Ranch, after guiding Jeff to the upper Pipe-organ and finding out the location of my claims, and told your stepfather all about it, didn't he? You, with my interests at heart, made it a point to overhear their conversation. In that way, perhaps, you learned Jeffrey's address. So you hurried here to—er—to help your brother out. If I'm wrong I will forever after hold my peace."

Joyce seated herself and looked from one man to the other.

"He's told you about all of it, Mr. Deville," she said, smiling straight into Jeffrey's eyes. "I—I overheard all about the scheme to make you believe Lin's claims were worthless, so that you wouldn't advance money for the assessment work. They know Lin can't get to the upper Pipe-organ in time to do the work before snow flies, because of his broken leg. So they meant to jump the claims. I thought—I thought, after I understood the scheme, that you probably would

turn down any proposition that Lin had made to you. So I came—I ran away and came to tell you.”

“And just in time,” murmured Lin Columbia, resting his head on the back of his chair and closing his eyes. “Suppose you tell Mr. Deville all about it, *mestiza*.”

“Well, when Noah didn’t return from the rodeo,” she began, “I knew that he was spying on you, Lin. And when he at last showed up I overheard him tell Ozias Tyrone just how he had followed you from Selden to San Francisco, and how he located Mr. Deville’s hotel. Then—”

“Skip a lot there,” interrupted Lin. “We realize that he went to Porcupine ahead of Jeffrey and waited for him there. He was lucky in getting Jeffrey to engage him as guide into the Pipe-organ country. While there he found out where my claims were located. Then he got hold of the samples that Jeffrey had taken, and, instead of salting poor samples with gold in the old way, he took out the gold-bearing contents and substituted worthless rock-dust.”

“Why, Lin! How do you know?”

“I have a sudden fad for thought,” Lin told her.

“But how,” asked Jeffrey, at last deeply interested, “did this Noah Littlejohn, as you call him, manage to get into my leather bags? I padlocked them, poured sealing wax over the keyholes, and pressed my signet ring into the warm wax, leaving deep impressions. I am positive, because of a blowhole that showed in the wax, that the seals weren’t tampered with. The bags were stitched inside. It would be impossible to—”

“There’s where you make your mistake,” Joyce interrupted him. “Noah Littlejohn told Tyrone how he cut the stitching with a sharp jackknife, pulled out all of the thread ends, and glued the seams together again with a powerful liquid cement. He said that he

hadn't the slightest idea that the glue would hold, but he was taking a desperate chance. It did hold, fortunately for him, and you were fooled completely."

"You see," added Lin, "the protective measures that you took, Jeffrey, are scarcely new. Noah Littlejohn—or John Little—is a clever, crafty man. I knew it the moment I first set eyes on him at Tyrone Ranch. Knowing the prospecting game pretty thoroughly, he went along fully prepared to checkmate you."

Jeffrey's face was red. His handsome eyes looked apologetically at Lin. He rose to his feet impulsively and started toward Lin's chair, with a hand outheld.

"Lin—" he began; but suddenly he stopped short. "The bags are still at the assayer's," he told the girl. "Let's go and inspect them. If we find that the stitching has been ripped out and the seams glued together again, I'll know positively that I've been a fool. And I'll be the happiest man in San Francisco when I admit that I've been a fool."

"Let's go," said Lin, rising promptly.

But Jeffrey held out his hand, gripped Lin's.

"No," he muttered huskily, "we'll not go. I don't want to show any distrust of you again. You win, Lin. I was a fool—and I'm glad to admit it. Tomorrow I start for the upper Pipe-organ again. I'll go to Porcupine, hire Art Carey and Dennis Grinnell—and more men, if I can get them. We'll hike over the mountains again and complete that assessment work in time. I won't even stop to take new samples to the assayer. There! Does that satisfy you?"

Lin Columbia was an impressionable young man, open-hearted, emotional. Two tears coursed down his bronzed cheeks as he held the hand of the friend that he had lost and won again. Nor was he ashamed when he knew that the girl saw his tears, as he said to her simply: "Thanks, *mestiza*. I'll remember this."

"And now," suggested Jeffrey, seating himself again, "suppose you two tell me about yourselves, about Tyrone Ranch, and everything. I'm pretty much in the dark, you know. I never heard of you before to-day, Miss Larue. Tell me about yourself, your stepfather, and the man who was so clever up to the point where it became necessary to change his name. Do you know, Lin, that I've noticed a shocking lack of originality in crooks when they assume an alias? John Smith, burglar, we'll say, changes his name to Jim Smithson when the law gets after him. And now Noah Littlejohn assumes the spectacular name of John Little. Tell me about this man, Miss Larue. I'll admit that he fascinated me strangely. But just a moment, please. Here comes my sister Agnes."

Lin Columbia's expression changed instantly as he rose to his feet when Agnes Deville, dressed nattily for a horseback ride in the park, came into the room. The hazel eyes of Joyce Larue coasted from the handsome girl to Lin Columbia. She noted the sudden lighting up of Lin's blue eyes, the slight parting of his lips. Her own lips went straight, and she girded up her loins for a battle of wits against this beautiful girl whom intuition told her had come between her and the man she half believed she loved.

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE BRIDLE PATH.

It was Linneus Columbia who introduced Joyce to Agnes Deville, after Agnes had thrown her arms about her brother and kissed him.

"Agnes," he said, for the two had long since found that to Miss and Mister each other required too much time and formality, "I want you to get well acquainted with the *mestiza*. She's worth your time, and you can let that romp across your mental rostrum. And say"—he turned suddenly to Joyce Larue—"I can't ride in the park with Agnes now. Jeff and I'll have to be getting busy, if he's to leave to-morrow. I see you're wearing a riding costume. I can't imagine why, but—"

"I rode into Spruce just as the train was whistling for the station," the girl interposed. "I had barely time to throw my bridle reins to a friend of mine and ask him to take care of Punishment, and then leap on the steps of a coach."

Lin looked at her inscrutably, and his smile was full of meaning.

"You don't wait for next trains when your friends need you, do you, *mestiza*?" he said softly.

The color came to the bronzed cheeks of the mountain girl, and her brown eyelashes concealed her hazel eyes. Agnes was watching her closely and thoughtfully.

"And did I hear you say that you rode Punishment?" Lin asked.

Joyce nodded, with her eyes still lowered.

"Why?"

"I—just wanted to, that's all."

Lin watched her a moment longer, but her eyes did not meet his.

"Anyway," he continued, as if rousing himself from reverie, "you're all ready for the saddle. Why don't you ride with Agnes this morning and get acquainted?"

"I'd be delighted to have her do so," Agnes put in politely.

"Then that's settled," bubbled the irrepressible Mr. Columbia.

"But—but I must be going back to Spruce," Joyce hesitated.

"Take the afternoon train. Go on, please—do as I ask. I simply must compare grammatical errors with this old toadherder here. Want to see you again before you shoot for the mountains, but can't right now. Just found out how much this man loves me, and I wanta bask in the sunshine of his affection. Kill time with Agnes till I can have a talk with you later, *mestiza*. Won't you?"

Joyce laughed. "All right," she agreed. "Are you ready to go right now, Miss Deville?"

"Yes," Agnes replied.

She linked her arm in that of the girl from Tyrone Ranch; and, bidding the two men good-by, they left them alone with their glowing plans.

A groom from the riding stables was waiting before the hotel with two handsome horses—a chestnut and a black. Joyce looked askance at the "postage stamp" on the chestnut's back which, the man assured her, was a saddle. The black horse bore the big California saddle that Lin had ridden in to defeat at the rodeo.

They mounted. The groom adjusted Joyce's stirrup straps. Then they were away, Agnes on the chestnut, Joyce on the black, seated comfortably in Lin Columbia's saddle.

In silence, for a time, they threaded their way through the busy streets. This was a new experience for the girl from the Pipe-organ, but she was a good rider and the animal under her was thoroughly city broke.

Eventually they reached a less traffic-infested section, when of their own accord the horses broke into a brisk trot. Joyce watched in complete astonishment the jockeying of Agnes as she rose in her stirrups to break the jar of her horse's gait. It seemed so ludicrous that the mountain girl restrained her amusement with an effort.

They reached the park, swung through the wide entrance into a land of fragrance and soft green slopes and picturesquely wooded stretches.

"What a beautiful park," ventured Joyce. "I've read so much about Golden Gate Park, but I've never seen it before. Isn't it marvelous?"

"Yes, it's wonderful," the city girl replied. "How strange that you've never before seen Golden Gate Park. Let's walk our horses and have a talk. I want to know something about your country. In fact, I'm terribly anxious to know all about it. For I mean to go up there when Lin and Jeff start work at their mines. And tell me, please—unless you have some personal reason for not telling—what brought you to our hotel. Nobody explained to me, and I didn't like to ask. Lin and Jeff seemed excited about something, so I didn't want to bother them."

Their horses followed the bridle path through flowering shrubs and gorgeous, nodding blossoms. The *mes-tiza* told of what she had overheard Noah Littlejohn

telling Ozias Tyrone—the episode that had brought her to San Francisco—and of the majestic beauty of the Pipe-organ country. But her innermost thoughts were elsewhere. She was thinking about Agnes's statement that she intended going into the mountains when work began at the mines. Joyce knew why she had planned to go. It was so that she could be near Lin Columbia. Joyce was not just sure whether she wanted this handsome, refined girl to be near Lin Columbia.

Joyce knew well that Lin was susceptible to the artificial life of the cities. She knew that, despite his slangy, rough-and-ready mode of speech, he was an educated man, and had at some time in his life been accustomed to wealth and the luxuries that wealth will buy. She had not known fully until to-day that she was beginning to think a great deal of this man who had wandered to Tyrone Ranch behind three grunting burros.

"So you intend to go into the Pipe-organ country?" she said finally. "Do you think you'll like it?"

"I don't exactly know," Agnes confessed. "I've never roughed it a great deal. But I'm willing to try."

"Why?" came the outspoken question.

The pink crept up the slender neck of the San Francisco girl until her face was bathed in it. Joyce watched her carefully, but Agnes kept her dark eyes averted.

"I— Why, I suppose I crave the novelty of such a life. My brother and I are great chums. We've been together constantly since Father and Mother passed away. I—I'd hate to be separated from him now."

"Lin Columbia interests you, doesn't he." Joyce did not make it a question.

"Why—yes, of course. There is a great deal about him to admire."

The *mestiza* suddenly became primitive.

"Listen," she said, scarcely realizing it, "you and Lin would never be happy together, Miss Deville. While he's city bred, not a stranger to culture, and all that, he's not your kind. You couldn't follow where he'd lead you. It isn't in you."

"Why, Miss Larue!" cried Agnes, her cheeks aflame. "What are you saying? Why do you speak to me like that?"

"I don't know," replied the mountain girl, now a trifle abashed. "I—I beg your pardon. I shouldn't have spoken as I did. But—"

"But what?"—from straight lips.

"I—I hardly know. I'm terribly impulsive, Miss Deville. I was just thinking that you and Lin are becoming very much interested in each other, and—and—"

"Well, and what?"

"Forgive me—won't you, please? It's really none of my business."

For the first time since the situation had become strained Agnes Deville looked at her companion.

"You are right," she said crisply. "It is none of your business. But let it pass. Shall we gallop a little now? And—and talk about something else?"

"Yes," the Tyrone girl meekly replied.

But that afternoon, when Lin Columbia pressed her hand and hurried from the moving train that was to carry her back to Tyrone Ranch, she vowed solemnly that, if Agnes Deville took up her abode in the Pipe-organ country, she—Joyce Larue—would manage some way to go there too.

CHAPTER XVI

PRELIMINARIES,

TRUE to his word, Jeffrey Deville, without further investigation, returned to Porcupine and outfitted once more for a quick trip into the Pipe-organ country. Besides Art Carey and Dennis Grinnell, he secured five "muckers" to accompany him. And in a short time after he had regained confidence in Lin Columbia work was in full swing in Flytrap Cañon.

They labored far into the winter months, Jeffrey himself swinging a pick and wielding the shovel, much to the benefit of his physical well-being. Before Christmas the assessment work of the entire group of claims had been completed, and the party was ready for the homeward trip on snowshoes.

Though Joyce Larue had returned to Tyrone Ranch the day following her unexpected advent in the Deville suite in the St. Ignatius, Ozias Tyrone and Noah Littlejohn knew nothing whatever of what was taking place on the upper bend of the Pipe-organ.

Joyce had a difficult time explaining her mysterious departure from the ranch, both to her mother and to her stepfather. She had a girl friend at Spruce, with whom she claimed she had been staying while absent from the rancho. This was true in part, for she actually had visited this girl before taking the trail back home.

Her secret leave-taking she made no effort to ex-

plain, merely stating that she had taken the sudden fancy to go and had gone. The more she was questioned, the more stubborn and reticent she became. Gradually, therefore, the subject was dropped; but she often surprised Ozias looking at her with suspicion in his coal-black eyes.

Lin Columbia remained in San Francisco during Jeffrey's sojourn in the wintry altitudes. He called often on Agnes Deville, enjoying her society immensely. She offered a taste of things that he had almost forgotten. He appreciated the refined atmosphere of her home and the culture of friends of hers with whom from time to time he came in contact.

But he did not forget the *mestiza* of Tyrone Ranch nor what she had done for him, at great risk to herself.

His leg was healing fast, now; he had discarded his cane. By the time that spring had come he would be fit for any ordeal entailed by the rugged Pipe-organ Country. Day by day he planned for the big things to come when the winter broke in the mountainous region and he and Deville should be ready to put all of their energy into the big project before them.

Then one day, in a newspaper, he read about the new railroad that was to build a branch line which would cross the Sierra on its way to the Pacific Coast. He drew in his breath in amazement and hurried to Agnes Deville with the startling news.

The new railroad was to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains through the divide known as the Peddler's Crutch. That meant that the branch line would be barely twelve miles from the gold claims. It meant, too, that the railroad must continue in an easterly direction, go through Cutthroat Pass, and traverse Tyrone Ranch from one end to the other. What glorious news this would make for his partner when, weary

from his long task of the winter, he came back to civilization.

Agnes Deville was delighted with the new prospects. She at once put him in touch with Mr. Henry McDade, a wealthy and influential friend of Jeffrey, the man who had failed to make one of the duck-hunting party, and whose place Jeffrey had taken while he wrestled with his misery over suspecting Lin of being a would-be swindler. McDade, at Agnes's solicitation, saw to it that Lin was introduced to the chief engineer of the Intermountain and Pacific Slope, the company that was to build the branch through the Peddler's Crutch. From the engineer Lin Columbia learned that the preliminary survey was expected to begin on the new project as soon as spring opened. With the route once definitely established, the company meant to rush the work to completion with all practicable speed.

The engineer was only too glad to be of any assistance whatever, for a valuable producing mine twelve miles from the proposed new route meant freight shipments. He in turn introduced Lin to several contractors, both prominent and more or less obscure, who contemplated bidding on the work. And through this channel Lin met Tristram Derry.

Tris Derry, as he was known in construction circles, was an all-around "gypo" man or "shanty" man—that is, a small time contractor who sub-contracts on light work. Derry had for years been following the big outfit of Demarest, Spruce & Tillou, contracting to clean up light jobs which were too unimportant for the larger concern to handle. He stated that if Demarest, Spruce & Tillou were fortunate in securing the main contract he undoubtedly would sub-contract a small piece of work from them.

It struck Lin Columbia that Tris Derry owned just such an outfit as would be necessary to build the twelve

miles of wagon road from his claims to the railway. Though the work represented no small task, Lin thought that a big contractor scarce would be willing to carry out the plan that Lin had in mind, which was to go into the mountains as soon as spring opened, packing in all necessary implements and supplies, and beginning the wagon road at once, so that the claims would be connected with the railroad by the time the steel had been laid.

He put the matter up to Derry, who considered it favorably. Derry was a rough-and-ready Westerner who liked nothing better than a job which presented such difficulties. He seemed to take a peculiar sort of pride in working to overcome difficulties which the ordinary contractor would shrink from. In short, Tris Derry came of pioneer stock, and it was in his blood to try and tame the wilderness by old-fashioned methods.

He believed that everything necessary to his camp could be packed in through the trackless stretches of forests and mountains. There would be no machine work whatever—teams, scrapers, dynamite, and the lowly pick and shovel must be sufficient to accomplish the task. The packing in represented no light difficulty.

It was arranged, then, that as soon as it was possible to get into the Pipe-organ Country, he would go with Lin and look over the proposition. Being somewhat of an engineer, he thought that he would be capable of laying out a satisfactory route without engaging the services of an expert.

All that held Lin Columbia back now were the deep snows in the Pipe-organ Country and the approval of Jeffrey Deville.

Jeffrey came sooner than he had expected. There was pioneer blood in Jeff's veins, too, and, besides, he

was filled with a new enthusiasm. So, against the advice of the miners whom he had taken with him, his party had set out as soon as the assessment work was done. The deep snow gave them a great deal of trouble, but, when they had slowly struggled halfway to Porcupine, and were on the point of giving up all hope, a keen south wind came and cut the snow from the mountainsides within twenty-four hours. Another storm was brewing, but the little party made it out to the lower levels while the snow was still fading before the warm thrusts of the wind.

His return to San Francisco was followed by much planning and speculation and longing for the great task to begin. Time dragged, but eventually the rains ceased in the coast country and the California hills were green with grass. Then it was that Jeffrey, Lin Columbia and Tris Derry took train for Porcupine, found out that a trip to the Pipe-organ Country was still a problematical undertaking, but decided to try it nevertheless. They outfitted and set off one morning early in March, and reached their destination, after surmounting many difficulties, ten days later.

They returned to Porcupine again, well pleased with the prospects; and then followed another long wait, until the fifth day of May. On that date a long pack train set out from Porcupine, bearing Tris Derry's construction outfit, to make the dream come true.

And meantime the new railroad was slowly worming its way from the Nevada line as far into the mountains as the Peddler's Crutch. For more than this Jeffrey Deville and Lin Columbia could not ask.

"And what are we going to call the mine?" asked Jeffrey of his partner the first night after they had gone into permanent camp on the upper bend of the Pipe-organ.

"If you don't mind," said Lin, with his good-humored face a trifle red, "I'd like to name it."

"Do so, by all means," Jeffrey offered. "I expected you to."

"Well—now—er—that is, Jeff, I had thought something of calling it the Mestiza Mine. Either that or— Do you suppose your sister would object if I were to name it the Agnes?"

Jeffrey's lips twitched. "I think that she'd be delighted," he said gravely. "Personally, however, I like the Mestiza better. It sounds more Western, somehow—more appropriate, you know."

"Well, maybe it does," half admitted Lin. "I—I'll have to think it over."

CHAPTER XVII

DEFEAT

BETWEEN the Stranger Mountains and the rushing green waters of the upper Pipe-organ there was no more surprised man than Ozias Tyrone, when, riding with Noah Littlejohn in the wake of a couple of pack burros, he rode through Lost Squaw Valley and came upon the extensive camp of Tristram Derry. His black eyes blazed. His black whiskers seemed to rise at their roots like the hair of one who sees a ghost. His iron jaw sagged down in absolute mystification.

Beside him Noah Littlejohn sat his horse and gazed in utter amaze. His peeled, white face twitched, and the red underlids of his bloodhound eyes watered copiously. He ran his calloused fingers through his wispy, hay-colored hair, and his thin lips muttered broken sentences.

The two had not considered it necessary to hurry into the Pipe-organ Country to jump the coveted claims. They had deemed it impossible for Columbia to recover from the supposed setback that Noah had given him and accomplish the assessment work before the snow began to fly toward the latter part of the preceding year. They also had thought it impossible for Lin to get into the mountains early enough to finish the work in time that spring. So they had rested easily during the winter just over, secure in the knowledge that Cutthroat Pass, the easiest route to the

upper Pipe-organ, could not be negotiated. But because of the high winds that winter, more snow had lain in Tyrone Valley and vicinity than at the higher elevations. This they had not realized, and before them now lay the results of a seeming miracle.

"They're—it looks like they're here to work, boss," gasped Noah Littlejohn. "He's beat us. He's beat us, after all!"

The black-bearded lips of Ozias Tyrone twitched ominously, and in his eyes of jet leaped fires of hatred.

Ozias Tyrone was one of the few men on this earth who have never known defeat. He came originally from Alabama, where, for years before he could remember, the family of Tyrone had been in a feud with a neighboring family named Saunders. Like most Southern feuds, this one had represented a war of annihilation. The Tyrones had won before Ozias, a young man in his twenties, came West. Not a single member of the Saunders family was alive to recount the fury of the 'Tyrones' hatred. Ozias himself had killed four Saunders boys, and was proud of it.

When he settled in Tyrone Valley several homesteaders, seeing that he was to make a success of his venture, had essayed to establish claims adjoining his. Tyrone had told them once to go, and then had made them go.

So he had never been defeated, and now he looked upon the triumph of Jeffrey Deville and Lin Columbia as a personal affront. His black eyes blazed fire. He gritted his big white teeth through his heavy beard.

"Beat me!" he choked. "Beat *me!* Oh, no, Noah Littlejohn. He ain't beat Ozias Tyrone yet. This is my country—all of it. Who discovered it? Me—that's who! Who took the resk and brought eve'thin' he had up in here, run the nesters out, an' made a cattle country out o' her? Me—that's who! This

country's mine! You know that, Noah Littlejohn!"

"Yes, boss," Noah replied meekly.

"I'm lord o' th' Pipe-organ country, I'm tellin' ye!"

"You sure are, boss. I'm with ye!"

"Well, then! Don't talk about anybody beatin' *me*! I'm gonta show that Columbia boy—"

But just here that Columbia boy came from one of the tents.

Simultaneously and instinctively Tyrone and Littlejohn wheeled their horses and rode into the trees. Fortunately for them, the burros had wandered from sight, browsing through the scanty sage that found a living in the broken forest.

"Did he see us?" husked Ozias.

"Naw," drawled his right-hand man. "He wasn't lookin' our way a-tall."

The wide nostrils of Ozias Tyrone expanded with his relief, but the fire still smoldered in his black eyes.

"That's good," he said. "I wouldn't 'a' had 'im see us fer a pretty penny. Well, nothin' to be done here—now. Scout around an' haze th' asses this way. We'll head back to th' ranch. I gotta get to plannin', Noah. I'm gonta clean that fella. You watch me!"

"Why not get th' burros an' tie 'em up," suggested Noah. "Then you an' me c'n leave our horses an' scout about a bit. See what they're up to. Man, they've got an outfit in here! Big camp. How in thunder did they make th' raffle? We oughta find out what they're doin' before we trail back to Tyrone Valley."

"I know what they're doin'," snapped Ozias.

"They's only one thing they can be doin'."

"What's that, boss?"

"They're buildin' a road to th' claims. They'll run her in clean from th' Peddler's Crutch—that's what

they'll do. I'll let 'em build her, an' then I'll—I'll blow her up, by cripes!"

"Ye won't when ye think it over, Ozias," replied the peeled-face man knowingly. "But le's ferget that now, an' find out if ye're right about that road."

"Good!" consented Tyrone. "Ketch up th' canaries."

Half an hour later, immeasurably amazed, the two crept through clumps of mountain sage and viewed the building of the road from the Peddler's Crutch to the Flytrap. They saw teams of mules dragging slips and wheeled scrapers and dumping dirt over the edge of a steep precipice that dropped down to the level of the Pipe-organ. They saw men drilling blockholes, tamping in dynamite, or working with pick and shovel.

Ozias shook his head. "He's a wonder—he's a wonder," he admitted. "I didn't think it was possible to pack in an outfit like that. But there she is. Come on, Noah. I seen enough. I'm goin' back to Tyrone Valley an' make my plans to—to ruin him."

"How, boss?" again drawled Noah Littlejohn.

"I don't know jest now," Ozias replied. "But I'll think up a way."

"They's jest one best way," said Noah softly. "'Twon't do ye no good to blow up his road ner to stop th' work in any way. Let th' buildin' o' th' road go on. Chances are, Ozias, they're up in there right now gettin' out ore. They'll be sendin' out gold amalgam, I'm bettin', even before th' road's finished. Think a little, Ozias."

"Ye mean—" Ozias stared at him, a new light flickering in his black eyes.

"I mean that, in yer rarin' desire to hurt this hombre, ye're neglectin' th' best way to do it. Also neglectin' yerself. Also me—an' th' rest o' th' Tyrone Ranch

boys. Get th' gold, Ozias. How better could ye sting 'im?"

"By gosh!" muttered Tyrone. "I *am* a fool! Yes, sir—I been actin' like a plumb fool, Noah Littlejohn. That's 'cause I'm Southern, I reckon. I go off half cocked. O' course we'll get that gold when they send her out. Noah, I don't know what I'd do without ye to ca'm me down when I git to rarin' back like I do!"

"I'm always lookin' out fer yer int'rests, boss," smirked Noah Littlejohn, and his peeled face twitched until thin, veiny wrinkles covered it like tracings on a map.

Ozias was thoughtful as they stood upon their feet once more after crawling back to safety through the sage. He said suddenly, as they walked toward their waiting burros and saddle horses:

"But, Noah, it ain't in a Tyrone to wait. Us Tyrones is an impatient bunch. We always was. I wanta crack this fella now. Later we c'n git hold o' th' claims an' all th' gold that's in 'em."

"Why work 'em yerself when he'll work 'em fer ye?" offered Noah. "Don't git fussed up, boss. Take her easy. Learn patience. Wait!"

"Yer advice is genally good, Noah Littlejohn," praised Ozias. "I'll think her over, to say th' least. But it strikes me now's th' time to cripple 'im. Th' railroad's comin' in. Soon, now, th' mountings will be full o' folks, rarin' to do their duty by their fellamen an' honin' fer what they'll be a mind to call a square deal. Now th' mountings are wild—an' they be'long to Ozias Tyrone. Seems now's th' proper time to act. But I'll think over what ye told me—yes, sir, I'll think her over, Noah Littlejohn."

They came to their horses, mounted, and took up

the long trail back to Tyrone Ranch, defeated and amazed.

"I'll tell ye," remarked Ozias, as, a day later, they were riding through Cutthroat Pass. "We'll send one o' th' boys up there to work fer 'em. There's Small John Copper. If I mistake not, this Columbia boy ain't never seen 'im. He stayed down in the stubble fields, ye'll remember, when we drove th' cows to summer pasture durin' th' time Columbia was at Tyrone."

"Yes, Small John wasn't with th' drive," said Noah.

"We'll jest send 'im up there to work," added Ozias. "He c'n spy on 'em, an' let us know jest what they're up to. And Small John has mined a little, too. Maybe he c'n get work at th' claims instid o' makin' road. That'll be th' caper, Noah Littlejohn."

"Jest—exactly," Littlejohn agreed. "But here's another idea, boss: It's struck me all along, ever sence we saw what's been done under our very noses on th' upper Pipe-organ, that yer stepdaughter has got to be took into consideration."

"I don't know jest what ye mean, Noah."

"'Member th' time she beat it so indelicate from Tyrone on that there horse Punishment that Lin Columbia broke?"

"Sure do, and—"

"Wait a minute, Ozias, till I git through. I know ye was hoppin' mad, but ye'll be madder still when ye hear what I gotta say. D'ye know where that girl went that time?"

"To Spruce, she said."

"To Spruce and on," supplemented Littlejohn. "Ozias, she went to Frisco and told this Deville fella about me gluin' up th' bags. That's jest what kep' Deville from thinkin' Columbia was a bad one."

"How d'ye know that, Noah? I'm thinkin' yer ole

glue didn't hold, and that th' bags busted an' gave ye away."

"Even if they did bust, Deville wouldn't never been able to figger it that I'd took out th' good samples an' put plain rock-dust in them bags, Ozias. It ain't human fer a man to be clever enough fer that. No, Joyce she went to San Francisco an' told all about th' deal. I jest feel it in my bones. I know it, boss."

"How'd *she* know anythin' about it?"

"She heard us talkin'. I jest know she did. I saw it in her eye, before she rode away. But then, o' course, I didn't savvy th' meanin' o' that look. But listen, Ozias: Don't ye remember that she disappeared from Tyrone Ranch th' mornin' after th' night I rambled in from Porcupine an' told ye what I'd done? You an' me was in th' calf-feedin' corral. Don't ye remember? We was leanin' ag'in' th' stable, both of us.

"What was to hender her from bein' inside th' stable, listenin' through a crack? She gets it all. Then, next mornin', she ups an' beats it to Frisco, to tell Deville what she'd overheard an' keep 'im from breakin' with this Columbia fella. That's what I'm basin' my conjectures on, boss—th' simple fact that she beat it th' very next mornin' on Punishment. And, sence I been at Tyrone Ranch—some few years, ye'll admit, Ozias—Joyce never pulled off sech another trick."

"I'll admit she surprised me, Noah. I'll admit that was a new stunt fer Joyce, an' she was as stubborn as an Alabama mule when she come back an' I questioned her. But what's her ridin' Punishment got to do with it?"

"She never rode th' brute before, Ozias," said Noah. "An' she rode 'im that time fer sentimental reasons. Ozias, I got brains that puts two an' two together an' gets four fer th' answer. I know that yer stepdaughter is in love with Lin Columbia."

"Aw, thunder!" scoffed Ozias Tyrone.

"Laugh if ye want to," Littlejohn persisted. "I know th' signs. I'm free to confess to you alone, Ozias, that I been in love with Joyce myself fer a number o' years. I reckon I'm an ugly brute, but I got a heart. I love her—and I don't care who knows it. That is, I mean ye mustn't tell anybody at all, Ozias. Well, anyway, I read th' signs. Joyce she loves Lin Columbia, and—"

"Then I'll kill her!" bellowed Tyrone.

"No, Ozias; that ain't what I want at all. Leave it all to me. Somebody maybe will get killed, but it won't be Joyce."

Then they left Cutthroat Pass and looked down upon Tyrone Valley, smiling in the springtime sun.

"What I was gonna say about lookin' out fer Joyce," said Noah after a long lull in the conversation, "was this here, Ozias: If she's ag'in us—which I know good an' well she is—she'll likely be suspicious if we send Small John Copper to th' upper Pipe-organ to work in Columbia's gang. She'll tell Columbia to watch Small John, and John won't accomplish nothin'."

"Ye may be right, Noah Littlejohn. Go on—ye got th' brains, boy. What'll we do?"

"Simple," opined the peeled-faced Noah. "You git in a fight with Small John—er maybe both of us will—and chase 'im away. Maybe we could fake it so's Joyce would think you an' me an' all th' boys are sore on Small John. Make out like Small John done us dirt somethin' fierce. Put on a fake gunfight and chase Small John away. Let Joyce know all about it—see it all. Leave it to me. Strike ye, Ozias?"

"Strikes me fine, Noah," Ozias chuckled through his midnight beard. "I leave it all in yer hands, boy. Ye got th' brains. I'm fer ye, Noah Littlejohn!"

CHAPTER XVIII

SMILES AND MULES

It was perhaps a month later that a man with a bundle on a stick, the stick over his shoulder, hiked wearily from Cutthroat Pass to the log houses of Tyrone Ranch.

He was a tramp—a hobo—a construction stiff. He was the first of his kind, perhaps, to venture into this unknown land. He had been working on the new railroad, on the Nevada side, and, after the manner of his kind, his feet had begun to itch. Hearing vaguely of a small outfit at work in the mountains to the west of him—an outfit that had been transported over many weary miles on the backs of mules—his curiosity got the better of him, and he had set out for an investigation.

With only blazed trees and the stakes of the preliminary survey to guide him, he had trudged into the wilderness, carrying provisions on his back. After many strange adventures and mishaps, and nearly starving to death, he had eventually reached the lonely camp at the upper reaches of the Pipe-organ.

There, after he was rested and fed up, he decided that he "didn't want any of it in his," and began inquiring as to the best way out of his difficulties. Told by Lin Columbia that he might be able to get out by way of Cutthroat Pass and Tyrone Ranch, if he could carry enough provisions and would husband them well, he had decided to add one more desperate risk to a

life that had been all risks and hardships. So Mr. Columbia, in the goodness of his heart—and perhaps with an ulterior motive in view as well—had provisioned him and sent him upon his dangerous undertaking with his fervent blessing.

And so now he wandered down the undulating slopes to the log houses of Tyrone Ranch, and, still true to form as a wandering tramp, knocked on the back door of the main house to beg a “set-down” to still his present longings, and a “lump” to cheer him on his further way.

A dazzlingly pretty girl, with coils of dark-brown hair and sparkling hazel eyes, answered his knock. The sparkle did not leave her eyes when she saw the suppliant, but they grew rounder and surveyed him in complete amaze.

“Well, of all things!” gasped Joyce Larue. “Who are you, please, and where did you come from?”

“Madam,” whined the professional “moocher,” “I’ve walked a long ways and I’m very hungry. Could youse give me a little somet’in’ to eat and—”

“Of course you’ve walked a long way,” interrupted Joyce. “But where did you walk from, in Heaven’s name?”

“I come from—” The stiff paused and looked her over. Then, to her utter surprise, he lowered his husky voice to a whisper. “Say,” he asked, “are youse Miss Joyce—le’s see, now— Is yer name Joyce, ma’am?”

“Yes. Joyce Larue. What of it? How did you know?”

“Sh-sh-sh!” he warned portentously. “W’ere’s yer ole man, kid?”

“Don’t call me kid, or I’ll black your eye for you!” raged the girl. “What do you want, and—”

“Sh-sh-sh! Not so loud, Miss! Excuse me. I didn’t mean nuttin’. But de guy dat slipped me de eats for

dis joiney gimme a note to give to youse. An' he said yer ole man, ner none of 'em about here, was to see you git her. Here—watch yer step an' I'll slip her to youse."

"Well, of all things!" gasped Joyce again, as the tramp fumbled in his pocket and produced a dirty note.

But she looked at him with a kindlier gleam in her big hazel eyes as she unfolded the paper and read:

MY DEAR MESTIZA:

"I—I'll— Thanks! Thanks, ever so much. Come in, won't you? You'll not leave Tyrone Ranch hungry, and I'll give you all that you want to carry when you leave."

The trail-blazing tramp winked to himself as he followed the girl inside.

"I guess I don't understan' nuttin' about dese dames at all," he muttered. "No, nuttin' at all."

In the commodious kitchen the girl set before the wanderer an array of cold victuals. When he became noisily engaged over them she seated herself close to a window and eagerly unfolded Columbia's note. This time she read it in its entirety:

MY DEAR MESTIZA:

Linneus Columbia salutes thee! I pine for knowledge of the way of life in the valley that smiles from the Stranger to the Pipe-organ! Subscribe to this: I long for you day and night!

Here on the upper Pipe-organ I fulfill the mission of general manager of the group of mines that still goes without a name, curse mules and men, worry over the constant shortage of supplies, and long for an opening in the clouds that will let the sunshine through.

Seriously, though, everything is as snug as a pool ball in the corner pocket. We have several gold gophers at work

running tunnels into our little hill. Rock fudgers are tripping bowlders so that they roll into the cañon of the upper Pipe-organ, and great is the splash thereof. The road wends on apace through lordly pines and frowning defiles, through valleys bright with yellow mountain violets, past precipices that yawn hungrily beneath. One Tristram Derry oversees the disciples who have embraced our creed. And, altogether, big things loom ahead.

We have made something of a trail stretching between Porcupine and the Peddler's Crutch. The pack train that brings our supplies all too irregularly no longer breasts through chaparral that is higher than the head of man. With axes and bolos we have cut a path through it, so that traveling is comparatively easy. One can now ride horseback from Porcupine to the Crutch, which was not the case when we first moved in.

Our greatest difficulty, however, lies in supplying men and animals with the necessities of life. Our stock is underfed because of the hardships entailed in getting provisions and feed from our base of supplies. Three days after the pack mules have panting into camp the hay and grain are gone. Every day, though, with several men at work on the outside trail, the trip becomes easier and speedier. Nevertheless, we shall be unable to supply the camp unless our pack train is increased by at least twenty mules. And we have nobody to undertake the task. It seems definite that we shall have to cut down our force—lay off half the men and let loose half of the mules and horses to find their own living in the mountains. That means that our road will not be completed by the time that the steel is laid through the Peddler's Crutch.

All the time, too, we are getting out valuable ore. The claims are rich, *mestiza*. We are ready now to send out gold amalgam to the mint. But money, it seems for once, is of no account. We have hired all the mules in the country that are fit for packing, and neither Jeff nor I have time to go out of the mountains and hunt up more. At best, it would be a long, difficult task, not knowing where to go nor how to get there. We are beginning to think that we've

bitten off a chunk—attempted too much before a definite line of communication has been established.

Just thought you might be interested a little in our troubles. Hence the foregoing.

Now, can't you write to me? Address me at Porcupine. I'll get the letter some time. Tell me all about everything in Tyrone Valley. Cheer me up. Put on a record of happenings in your smiling land. Sing to me of spring calves that bawl, of wind that whispers through young grain, of cow detectives that worry. Decoy me to thoughts of red cows dotted over green pastures and of mountain brooks that murmur through the roots of solemn trees. I'm tired, *mestiza*. I want a letter from you to cheer me up.

Several days after you receive this note—if you *do* receive it—Agnes Deville will be on her way to the headwaters of the Pipe-organ. She is coming to help, I have been informed. Her presence will help, no doubt. A woman up here will be like an embroidered motto on the wall of a penitentiary dining room. Jeff and I haven't seen a curl-nudger for so long that we've forgotten what they look like. I think Jeff will giggle and blush when he kisses his own sister; and if he does that, what will happen to me?

Agnes says she wants to help—or did I mention that? She has the idea that she is going to keep books for us, and relieve us of all mental strain. She has intrigued the whim that our affairs are so complicated we need a grammar pup and a mathematical hound to straighten out the trail. Well, she may fiddle with the figures if she'll only smile. That's what we want. We want a woman's smile and twenty mules.

She's coming in alone, horseback. That is, she'll have company, of course, for her devoted brother is to trail out and meet her at Porcupine. But she'll be the only woman. How I wish you could join her, *mestiza*!

Good-by. Write to me when you can, and smile while you're writing.

Affectionately,
THE GRINGO.

Joyce smiled at the abrupt ending of the letter. It seemed, in a way, characteristic of this enigmatical man. She glanced at the tramp, still engrossed with his food. Her hazel eyes grew dreamy as she looked out the window, off over the green pasture lands to the forest beyond. Her red lips set themselves in lines of determination.

"So she's going to the upper Pipe-organ to 'help'!" she mused. "What can she do to help, I'd like to know? There's more trouble written between the lines of that letter than most people would guess. *I'd* like to help—him."

She looked at the tramp, blushing confusedly, as if she believed it possible for him to have read her mind.

"I can help," she said to herself in a whisper. "I will help! I—I'll show her—show *him*! He wants mules and a woman's smile, does he? She can give him the smile—I'll furnish the mules. I'll not only furnish them, but I'll haze them with supplies from Porcupine to the upper Pipe-organ. We'll see whose help is worth consideration. Oh, I—I know I love him now!

"No, you don't, Joyce Larue! You just think you do. Yes, you do, too! Oh, why couldn't he have written something more—more personal? He's falling in love with *her*—that's why! And she'll get him away from you, Joyce Larue, if you don't watch out! You're going to the upper Pipe-organ with smiles and—mules. *You've got to go—now!*"

CHAPTER XIX

OLD TIES BROKEN

WHEN Joyce Larue's father had died he left the girl and her mother certain gilt-edged six per cent bonds, which easily might be converted into cash at any time. The mother's had gone. Ozias Tyrone had had need of them in the development of his ranch.

But Joyce had clung to hers tenaciously, reinvesting the accumulated interest semi-yearly, or clipping coupons occasionally to get money with which to supply her simple wants. The work that she did in the kitchen at Tyrone Ranch she considered ample payment for her board and lodging.

When the tramp had taken his leave, well provisioned for the long trail between the ranch and Spruce, Joyce went into her own room, took her precious bonds from hiding, and toyed with the crackling papers.

Seven thousand dollars—and the unexpended accumulation of interest amounted to several hundred more. She would want small mules for pack animals, and she thought that she ought to be able to buy them for a hundred and seventy-five dollars apiece, at the highest figure. Pack outfits would probably cost in the neighborhood of fifty dollars each. Incidentals ought not to stand her over a hundred dollars, allowing a wide margin. She owned her own saddle horse and complete equipment for him.

She rapidly penciled light calculations on the border

of one of the bonds. Four thousand six hundred dollars was the result that she obtained. She pursed her lips. A lot of money—for her. But she was willing to risk it. She knew where to buy the mules. She knew of a ranch down in the Sacramento Valley where mules were bred and raised exclusively. She might have written to Lin about this ranch, but she preferred to surprise him.

She considered herself an expert packer. She had worked with her father in Mexico, packing supplies to a remote mine in the mountains. She was only a girl, it was true, but she anticipated few difficulties. The only rub that loomed large before her was the separation from her mother.

She had considered it her duty to remain by her mother's side, even though she detested Ozias Tyrone and the men who worked for him. If Tyrone was detestable, that was all the more reason she ought to stay with her mother and be ready to protect her from his raging anger if it should boil over in that direction. But now she loved a man. She had admitted it to herself.

Another woman loved this man, too, and was going to him, to be with him constantly—to try to help him. This woman would win him away from her if she stayed at Tyrone Ranch and gave her the opportunity to do so. No, things had come to a showdown. She must leave her mother and Tyrone Ranch in order to protect herself against something that threatened the happiness of her entire future.

Her musings were interrupted startlingly by the ominous sound of a revolver shot. Hoarse cries rang out. Another shot followed the first before she could get to the window.

For the past few days she had detected a certain sullenness among the men of the rancho. Particularly

between Noah Littlejohn and Small John Copper. This had been pronounced at the table during meals. She had sensed that trouble was brewing, but she did not know what it was about. Evidently the climax had been reached.

She was at the window now, holding back the curtains. Over in the vicinity of one of the corrals she saw two men on the ground, struggling fiercely, locked in each other's arms. Others stood about, shouting, but she could distinguish no words.

Then suddenly Ozias Tyrone took two quick steps toward the prone combatants, drew back a foot, and deliberately kicked the man who was underneath. Joyce could not determine the violence of that kick, nor where it had landed; but it seemed to her that the black-haired ranchman had kicked the other in the head.

Her blood boiled at the cowardice and injustice of it. The man on top—whom she now saw was Noah Littlejohn—was pummeling the fellow under him. Ozias danced about, aiming kick after kick at the other's head. The rest of the *vaqueros*—Booky Peters, Zachariah Fame, Bud Mohawk, and Curly MacMahon—seemed to approve of the procedure, for they were waving their hands and shouting encouragement.

"Stop it! Stop it!" cried the girl, leaning from the window.

She thought that Ozias glanced her way for an instant, but the battle did not cease and there was no other indication that anybody had heard her.

Joyce clenched her little fists until the finger nails bit into the flesh. Another kick from Ozias's booted foot brought from her an angry cry of protest. Ozias aimed another kick. Then it was that she ran to the opposite wall of her room, jerked her sixshooter from its holster, and scrambled through the window to the

open. Next instant she had picked herself up and was running with all her might toward the scene of the conflict.

Apparently no one saw her coming. Before the men were aware that she was near she had stopped, brought up her gun, and was covering all of them.

"Stop that instantly, Ozias Tyrone!" she called. She was surprised at her own coolness. "Stop kicking that man, I say, or I'll—I'll shoot you in the leg!"

Ozias paused in his torture, turned about, stared at her open-mouthed.

"I mean it!" she cried. "You big coward! Let the man up and give him a chance to fight his own battle. He's down now. What a cur you are!"

"Git outa here an' mind yer own business!" raged Tyrone. "Put up that gun or—"

"I'll not move a peg!" she shouted. "Noah Littlejohn, get off Copper this instant! And the rest of you stand pretty or I'll smoke you up! I mean every word I say! Ozias, don't attempt to kick that man again!"

With a snarl Ozias drew back his right foot. Joyce pressed her lips together.

"Don't!" she ordered.

The foot darted out in a vicious kick, aimed at Small John's head. The girl's sixshooter roared. The smoke leaped from the muzzle of her gun like the lunge of a rattlesnake.

There came a wild howl of rage and pain from Ozias Tyrone. He bent over and grabbed his leg in both hands.

"Ye've shot me, ye little devil!" he bawled. "I—"

"Yes, and I'll shoot the bunch of you, too, if you don't stop tormenting that man. Noah, get off!"

Noah Littlejohn had stopped beating the puncher, and for an instant his wild, milky eyes stared in amazement and consternation at the girl. Ozias was

hopping about, cursing roundly, holding the wounded leg.

"Noah!"

"Yes, ma'am," Noah croaked quickly, and he rolled from Small John Copper's body and struggled to his feet.

Small John immediately arose from the ground, tried to look angry and picked upon, but succeeded only in stretching a foolish grin from ear to ear. Ozias hopped about. The other cow-punchers stole sheepish looks from face to face and held their peace.

"Are you badly hurt, Small John?" asked the girl in a voice that seemed to come from far away.

"No'm—not—not much," admitted the shamefaced *vaquero*.

"Well, I'm glad of that. Get away from them now. Don't one of you make a move to molest him, or I'll open up. I don't threaten to kill anybody, but I'll put the first man that makes a move to bed. Go on, Small John."

Hanging his head, too embarrassed to look at her, Small John moved away and disappeared behind a stable.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" stormed the girl, looking witheringly at Ozias and his dumfounded men. "I've never before known such a thing to happen on this ranch. You've all been drinking. Ozias Tyrone, if you don't destroy that still of yours it's going to get you into more trouble."

"You mind yer own business!" was the only retort that came to the befuddled mind of the ranchman, as he limped about, nursing his leg.

Joyce turned away, her gun hand hanging limp at her side. Three hops and Ozias Tyrone was behind her. He struck her wrist a vicious blow from behind; the sixshooter rattled on the ground. He grasped

her shoulders and whirled her about, his hot breath striking her face as he fumed at her:

"Not so smart as ye thought ye was, are ye? Some gun-toter, you are! D'ye know what ye've done to me? Ye've put a bullet clean through my leg! I got a notion to kill ye!"

"Go on—help yourself," she offered coolly. "I suppose your crooked bunch would stand by and see you do it, too!"

"What d'ye mean, my crooked bunch?"

"Do you think you've been putting it over on me for the past three years?" she flung back at him. "I know who robbed the post office at Gallings. I know who held up the stage between Spruce and Gallings. I know who robbed the stores at Porcupine and Spruce. It was you, Ozias Tyrone—you and your gang. I repeat it—you are all crooks. But I didn't believe that you were curs and cowards!"

"I'll fire ye offen this ranch!" boiled Tyrone. "I won't have ye about here. Ye're nothin' but a nuisance, anyway! Feed ye and buy ye—"

"You never bought me anything, and I have worked for my board. You'll not have to fire me, either. I'm going to-morrow morning."

"Go, and be damned to ye! I want to see th' last of ye as soon as ye c'n make it outa here."

"You'll see the last of me soon," she threw back recklessly. "Take your hands off me!" And she jerked herself away from his clutch. "I'm going to work against you, too. I'm going to the man whom you tried to rob of his mining claims. Oh, I know all about you, Ozias Tyrone! I wouldn't have stayed here this long if it hadn't been for mother!"

"You pack up and git!"

"I will—don't worry." She started away again.

"Wait a minute!" he bawled after her. "Who's this I tried to rob, now? Who's this ye're goin' to?"

"Lin Columbia!" she shot at him, beside herself with anger, reckless in her speech.

"Oh, so that's th' way of her, eh? Well, I didn't try to rob 'im. None of us did. But that's neither here ner there. You—"

Noah Littlejohn had stepped to his boss's side. "Easy, Ozias," he cautioned in a whisper. "Let her go to 'im. That's jest what we want."

"Maybe ye're right, but I don't jest git ye," said Ozias. Then, swinging back to the girl: "Go on—beat it outa here while th' beatin's good! I'm through with ye forever, ye low-lived greaser!"

A hot retort was on Joyce's lips, but she set her teeth and maintained her silence as she hurried toward the house.

There followed a tearful conference with her mother, who had been standing on the veranda, wringing her hands. Afterward Joyce began to pack. She completed the simple task and sat at her window brooding. Late in the afternoon she walked to one of the close-by pastures and whistled up her horse, a leggy bay gelding that she had raised from a colt. She put him in a corral for the night in order to have him handy for an early start next morning.

She helped her mother to get supper ready, but was not present at the table when the men ate. Afterward she nibbled at some cold food, but had no appetite. The night came on. She sat at the window and watched the rising moon, thinking of Lin Columbia and the strange happenings of the day.

A guarded voice roused her suddenly. A man stepped into the moonlight and approached her window slowly.

"Who is it?" she demanded. "What do you want?"

"It's me, ma'am," returned a husky voice. "I come

to tell ye that, if ye'll let me, I'll ride out with ye to-morrow. I'm quittin'. I got enough o' this dirty bunch—you know how it is, Miss Joyce. And won't ye take me with ye when ye go over where ye was goin'? I—I gotta get me a job somewhere. I got a mother and two sisters dependin' on me, I have."

It was Small John Copper, the defeated gladiator, who leaned on the window sill and pleaded with the girl who had championed his cause that day.

CHAPTER XX

PACKSADDLES AND THINGS

SHORTLY after daybreak the following morning Joyce Larue and Small John Copper rode away from Tyrone Ranch and took up the long trail to Spruce.

Behind them a middle-aged woman wept over the leave-taking of her only daughter. A ranchman sat with his wounded leg propped up and profanely confided to his foreman that now he would be obliged to hire a Chinaman to help in the kitchen.

Noah Littlejohn chuckled and was very happy, for his plan had worked out to perfection—even better than he had dreamed. Small John Copper, the conspirators' spy, was leaving in company with Joyce Larue. The girl was in sympathy with him. She would see to it that he received high recommendation when he presented himself before Lin Columbia and asked for work.

The riders did not speak to each other until a bend in the trail hid Tyrone Ranch from view. Then Joyce glanced at her wizened companion and smiled.

Small John Copper was a diminutive man, barely five feet three in height, with a twisted, leathery face and corrugated lips. His broad-brimmed Stetson looked enormous on his bullet head. His worn, fringed chaps seemed to have been borrowed from an older brother. His eyes were small, set askew in his face, and the color of the hot cloudless sky that hangs over the desert in summer.

"What did they do to you yesterday, Small John?" asked the girl.

Small John reached up a hand to the side of his forehead and sighed.

"They rampsed me a-plenty," he maintained. "I'm all swole up about here, Miss Joyce."

Joyce had to take his word for it, for she saw no swelling and no broken skin or bruises.

"I kep' up my hands pretty well," he added, "so's Ozias couldn't get at me good. He'd 'a' killed me if I hadn't."

"What was the trouble, anyway?" asked the girl, idly flipping her leather chaps with her quirt.

"Nothin' a-tall, Miss Joyce. Jest nothin'. I didn't do a thing, honest!"

"You must have done something to displease all of them," she prompted.

"Well, I—I— We was all pretty well lit up, Miss Joyce. We'd been drinkin' more or less all day. I got into an argument with Noah Littlejohn. We got to shootin' it back an' forth at each other, an' th' rest took it up, sidin' in with Noah. It was jest one o' them fool arguments over nothin', ye might say. I said they was more cow business in Montany than they is in Texas—an' I still hold to what I said. None of 'em agreed with me, an' one word brought on another till Noah lit into me. Then I got to callin' names, and—

"Well, you savvy. We was jest drunk an' mad. But that's a rotten bunch, anyway. I been gonta quit fer quite a spell. Noah an' Ozias they both been peckin' on me somethin' fierce."

"I see. And you need another job right away, do you?"

"Yes, I do. I been tryin' to save some money. My mother an' sisters, you know."

"You never told me about them before, Small John."

"I know. I don't go 'round croakin' my family affairs. But they need my help, an' I gotta get me a job right pronto."

"How are you as a packer?"

"Why, I guess I could pack some. I c'n make th' two-man diamond hitch an' th' square hitch. Ye know I'm handy with stock, Miss Joyce. What was it ye had in mind?"

"Small John," she said, "I'm going to start a pack train of twenty mules on the trail from Porcupine to the Peddler's Crutch with supplies for the new mining camp up there. I'll need help. Do you want to work for me at the same wages you were drawing down at the ranch?"

Small John Copper's lean jaw sagged.

"Miss Joyce, d'ye mean that *you're* gonta—"

"Certainly! Certainly!" she interrupted a bit irritably. "Don't remind me now that I'm a woman and tell me I can't do it. Because I can, and I'm going to. Want the job?"

"Why—why, sure," stammered the little *vaquero*.

"Then you're hired," stated the girl. "Your pay begins to-day. When we get to Spruce I shall expect you to go down into the Sacramento Valley with me and help me select the mules at the Tilden Ranch. We'll buy them and ship them to Porcupine. You will go along with the car. I'll run down to San Francisco and buy my outfit. You unload the stock at Porcupine and take care of them till I get back.

"I'll arrange for your board and feed for the mules by telephoning Mr. Pearl, the postmaster and store-keeper there. I don't know him personally, but I've heard of him ever since I've been in this country; and I guess he knows who I am. Anyway, I don't anticipate any difficulty along that line."

Small John Copper scratched his knotty head. "It's

all right, I guess," he told her. "But what's th' grand idea, anyway, Miss Joyce?"

"The grand idea is that I'm through with Ozias Tyrone and Tyrone Ranch forever. Another phase of it is that I'm anxious to be doing something. I'm an outdoor girl, and hazing a pack train from Porcupine to the Peddler's Crutch appeals to me. I know I'm only a girl, but that's just why I want to do it. I want to show—somebody—that I can—can do anything."

"There'll be a lotta hard work," opined Small John.

"I know it," replied the girl. "I'm not afraid of it."

Joyce and her doubtful ally pushed their horses along and reached Spruce ten minutes before the arrival of the local "rattler" for Sacramento. While Small John Copper arranged for the care of their horses during their trip into the valley, Joyce sent a wire to the branch office of the underwriters whose bonds she held. She stated in the message that she would be in Sacramento next day and would wish to convert her bonds into cash, asking them to make an effort in the meantime to find a buyer for them or to take them up themselves.

She and Small John reached the capital city about ten o'clock that night. With the beginning of office hours the following morning Joyce was in the street, hastening to the underwriters. To her vast satisfaction she found that the money was waiting for her, and that the discount demanded for cashing the bonds was slight. At half past nine she and Small John were in a hired automobile and on their way to Tilden Ranch to buy the mules.

Arrived there, Joyce found Small John's experience invaluable. Be it said for him that he interested himself in the business at hand, and went over every mule offered in the attitude of a sincere critic. The twenty

were at last decided upon, the cash paid down. The girl and her right-hand man were invited to remain at the ranch for the night. The offer was accepted. A telephone message to a near-by station secured a stock car for the transportation of the animals. And early next morning ranch hands, accompanied by Small John Copper, set off with the mules for the loading chute, while Joyce was driven to Sacramento by the owner of Tilden Ranch.

She boarded a train for San Francisco within an hour after reaching Sacramento. When she entered the city she hurried to a saddlery company, where, to her dismay, she found out that twenty packsaddles and twenty sets of bags made an unheard-of amount for a dealer to keep on hand. But she exacted the promise that work would begin on her order that very day. In three days, at most, she was assured, her twenty outfits would be completed. It would require another day to ship them to Porcupine.

She wondered as she left the saddlery company's store if she dared to call on Agnes Deville at the St. Ignatius Hotel. She dared, she told herself, but decided against it. She would see Agnes soon enough, anyway. So she consulted her time-table, and left the city in a sleeper just as darkness fell.

At seven o'clock next morning the Pullman porter awoke her in Sacramento, where the train had been standing idle for several hours. Another train was just on the point of pulling out, and the porter helped her up the steps. Before noon she left the day coach in which she had been riding and descended to the sun-baked depot platform at Porcupine.

Ralph Pearl was in evidence here, with his chin whiskers bobbing up and down as he busied himself with the trifling duties imposed upon him by the arrival of the train. The *mestiza* accosted him, made herself

known, and shook his knotty hand. No, there had arrived no carload of mules and no sawed-off wrangler with puckered lips and twisted eyes. But she could stop at Pearl's hotel until the afternoon freight came in, which doubtless would bring the expected shipment.

Small John Copper and the mules arrived in accordance with the postmaster's surmise. The car was kicked on a siding and the animals were unloaded. For a small sum Joyce had leased a piece of land close to the store to be used as a camp site and corral when her outfit would be at Porcupine. She had hired a couple of men, and the plot was nearly inclosed with barbed wire before the mules arrived. Now, when they were cared for, she had Small John pitch the tents that she had bought, one under a sprawling oak, the other at the foot of an enormous pine at one corner of the site. She sent Small John to Spruce for their saddle horses.

The other two men she kept at work the entire afternoon and until the evening the following day, making things snug and comfortable for a headquarters camp. She hired Art Cary, one of the men who had gone with Jeffrey into the Pipe-organ Country on his first trip, to act as helper to Small John Copper during the trips to and from the Peddler's Crutch. Now all was in readiness for the arrival of the pack train from the mines, which would be accompanied by Jeffrey Deville. And the girl became nervous as the time for its appearance drew closer.

She did not even know that the partners desired her services as packer. For all she knew, some new arrangement might have been made between the day that Lin wrote his note to her and the present. She censured herself now for her boldness in going ahead, investing no small sum of money, and all but forcing herself and her new outfit into the scheme of things. How stupid

she had been! What would Jeffrey Deville have to say to her when she told him what she had done?

The day before her saddles and bags came from San Francisco she was standing on the broad veranda of the store and post office. She was able to look off over the undulating hills toward the Pipe-organ Country, and as she stood gazing she saw a cloud of dust arising at the top of one of the many rounded eminences between her and the higher elevations.

Ralph Pearl, too, had seen it from a window of the store, for he stepped out and stood at her side.

"That's the Pipe-organ outfit a-comin', Miss," he said. "They ain't any road over thataway, so nothin' else could make so much dust raise. Mr. Deville'll be with em, I guess. His sister's due here on th' afternoon train. He's comin' to meet her."

"I know," Joyce said absently.

Sensing that the girl was uncommunicative, the little postmaster retired into his store again. Joyce stood watching, frequently biting her lips with nervousness, until the mules came into view.

She made out three men accompanying the train, and counted sixteen mules—all too large for pack animals. They belonged, she supposed, to the contractor, Tristram Derry, that Lin had mentioned in his note. The outfit left the trail and swung into the highway, where its passage raised more dust than ever, so that the men were almost obscured.

The shavetails stepped along at a brisk walk toward the store, a man on either side of them, the third behind them. The pack bags were flat and empty. The lead mule began to neigh brazenly, and his followers took it up. Over in their corral Joyce's young mules joined in the general chorus. Before the veranda the lead mule halted himself, and the others came to rest behind him. The two men who had walked as flankers stepped

on the veranda, where one sat down on a bench and mopped his dusty brow, while his companion entered the store.

Then out of the settling dust came the third man.

Next moment Joyce Larue was gazing in a startled way into the smiling blue eyes of Lin Columbia.

CHAPTER XXI

AGNES ARRIVES

"STUTTERIN' Demosthenes!" gasped Lin Columbia; and his head went forward, down, and upward so that he was looking at Joyce Larue as if peeking at her from under a fence, as John Little had described it. "What a whale of a jubilee! I'm a snake-eyed monster if I don't behold you, *mestiza*!" Then he straightened, thrust forth a strong brown hand, folded hers within it. "What a day! Hard trip. Picked up a pique first thing this morning, and ostracied kind thoughts for the entire day. Dust—sore feet—mules with hell-loose-notions about travelin' every way but forward—legs aching from carrying their father—coffee all over the bottom of a pack bag and full of alfalfa leaves—curses—black looks—murderous thoughts—blistering sun. Then the end of the trip and past turmoils become a blessing. The end of the trip and—you! Sister, shake!"

"Oh, Lin, I didn't expect you!" she cried in great confusion.

"Didn't expect myself," he said quaintly. "Sit down by me here on this bench. Fellow"—he turned to the man already seated—"rise and shine. Go into the store and buy gum drops. Vacate that divan. Unthrone yourself. Fade away."

His companion of the trip grinned good-humoredly, as if entirely accustomed to this nonsense, and left the

bench. Lin led Joyce to it by the hand, seated her with a grand air, and settled down beside her.

"Now," he asked, "whence the whyness?"

"But I expected Mr. Deville, Lin," she told him.

"Sorry to disappoint you, little one, but the Honorable Jeff is pestered beyond belief with the gentle itch of the luxurious poison oak. Cheeks swollen till his eyes look like icicles melting in spring. Nose like a dill pickle. Weeps copiously and begs for sympathy, which is denied him. So here am I to greet his sister and conduct her into the land that God made after He'd practiced on the rest of the universe. Sore about it?"

"No—of course not."

"Get my note?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Well, I—I—" She came to a sudden stop, looked at him out of the corners of her eyes, and pointed to the young mules lipping at the alfalfa dust that remained from the noonday meal.

"Speak, don't motion," advised Columbia.

"I—I— Oh, you'll think I'm a fool, Lin, but I— Those are my mules. I bought them. I've left Tyrone Ranch forever. I wanted to help you by—by running a pack train from Porcupine to the Peddler's Crutch. You wrote that you needed twenty more mules to keep your outfit supplied. I can pack. I've done it with my father in Mexico before ever I came to the United States. And so I—I bought twenty mules, hired two men to help me, and—and I want to pack supplies to the Pipe-organ. I suppose I'm silly to have gone ahead without having made arrangements, but—but I'm just too impulsive. When I get an idea in my head I start to work it out at once. And—well, here I am. Am I crazy?"

Lin's head went forward, and he peered up at her in his comical way. "You—own—those—twenty—mules?"

"Yes."

"And *you* want to pack supplies to the upper Pipe-organ? You're sure it's *you* you're speaking about?"

"Yes, I."

Lin lowered his glance and stared at the rough flooring of the veranda.

Joyce waited nervously, but he did not look up.

"Well," she asked timidly at last, "what—what have you to say about it, Lin?"

He looked up at her then.

"Oh, yes," he said. "It's my time to say something, isn't it? What do I say? Why, let's see. Oh, I know now. Three rousing cheers!"

"You mean that you're glad—not provoked with me?"

"Glad! I'd be a fine dish of goulash to be anything but glad. I'm hemmed in with hilarity, *mestiza*. But I'm unable to ornament my speech with words. Grammar leaves me grabbing at her tail. My tongue fails to flaunt my command of languages, alive or dead. Mentally I'm a minus sign. But glad! I'm so glad it hurts. Say, *mestiza*—press your blotter over this: I'm as glad as the picture of a contented cow on the label of a can of milk. I'm raving happy! But why, *mestiza*? Just why?"

"I—I wanted to help you, Lin." It was out before she realized it, and her face was red with confusion.

She felt his smiling blue eyes on her face, and her confusion grew. She waited tremblingly, hazel eyes downcast. Then she felt his hand steal over hers, thrilled at its pressure.

"I understand," he told her, and she thrilled again

at the unsteadiness of his tones. "Go on now—tell me all about it. Tell me everything."

She told him slowly, hesitatingly, of her decision to leave Tyrone Ranch and how it had been augmented by what she imagined to be the cowardly treatment experienced by Small John Copper. She told of the parting with her mother, of the bonds, of her adventure in buying the mules and packsaddles. And while they sat there talking they heard the distant whistle of a train.

Then Pearl came running from the store, chin whiskers quivering spasmodically, clattered down the steps, and grabbed the handle of his pushcart. With the cart rattling before him he ran like mad over the uneven ground in the direction of the depot. But before he reached it the train had groaned to a pause and the brakeman was helping down to the platform a trim little figure in gray, while the baggageman piled numerous trunks on a truck.

"Agnes has arrived," said Joyce soberly.

"Yes, I guess that's right," answered Lin Columbia. "Ought to have been over there to meet her. Let's—let's you and I both go now."

"Oh, gringo, I'd rather not—" Joyce caught herself. "All right," she agreed; and side by side they left the veranda and started toward the depot.

"She'll—she'll be surprised to see me," ventured the girl as they hastened along.

"Will she? Why?"

The girl could not answer that, or did not want to, and Lin refrained from pressing her for a reply.

Agnes Deville saw them coming and recognized them. She was talking with Ralph Pearl, but turned from him as Joyce and Lin ascended the steps to the depot platform. She waited, casting but one tiny glance of surprise at the mountain girl, cool, composed, but with

gladness in her dark eyes as they fixed themselves on the stalwart figure of the "child of the boundless West."

"Well," she remarked, "this is a doubly pleasant surprise. But don't tell me, Lin, that anything has happened to Jeff." Her composure could not down the anxious note in the question.

"Nothing—nothing, Agnes," chirruped Lin, "Hurry up and shake hands with the *mestiza*, or kiss her or something, and get round to me. Your estimable brother has crowned himself king of the poison oak country. And heavy is the head that wears a crown. We keep him chained between meals, for he's violent only when not engaged in eating. There—that was very nice and ladylike. Now shake hands with me, or kiss me or something."

"I oughtn't even to shake hands with you, after that," Agnes reprimanded him, dropping the brown fingers of Joyce and offering her hand to Lin.

Three abreast, they walked to the store, Joyce saying nothing, Agnes and Lin chattering constantly, the latter trying in vain to draw the silent one into the conversation. A trifle confused, constrained to think of what might lie before her in the future, Joyce scarcely followed the dialogue that was taking place beside her.

Then suddenly she realized that Lin was telling Agnes that she—Joyce—had bought mules and was to run a pack outfit from Porcupine to "the front." She looked up to find Agnes's cold eyes fixed upon her intently, and she imagined that they held a look either of scorn or pity, or both.

She felt very uncomfortable until they reached the hotel, where she excused herself immediately and retired to her room. She wanted desperately to cry now, but straightened her lips and remembered that it

was not seemly for the driver of a train of twenty pack mules to give way to tears.

That evening after dinner with Agnes and Lin in the hotel, she found herself alone with Lin on the veranda of the store. They talked over her venture, and Lin thought that, if his partner agreed, they could pay her five cents a pound for packing supplies to them. They conversed of many things pertaining to the project, but never once mentioned Agnes Deville.

"You may load up as soon as your pack outfit comes," he told her. "We want to get an early start to-morrow; so, unless your things come on the morning train, we can't wait for you. The train gets in at seven twenty-nine, I believe. We'll hang about till then, anyway."

He gave her a list of freight that the camp required, and then brought up the subject of transporting gold amalgam from the Pipe-organ to Ralph Pearl's temporary keeping.

"We haven't sent out an ounce," he declared. "We were afraid to, for we dared not trust the hobos who are hazing the pack mules for Tris Derry. We have corraled almost every available man in the country to work on the road or in the mines.

"You were very lucky in getting Art Carey, for I meant to grab him on this trip, if he wanted to come along. He's been away, you know, and got back just before you came in. There was nobody, it seemed, that we could trust. We've got quite a bit of gold, which we're anxious to turn into cash. But, honestly, I hate to have you try to bring it out. It may be dangerous. What about this Small John Copper whom you brought from Tyrone Ranch. Do you trust him?"

"I've known him for some time," she said. "But he's not been at Tyrone Ranch as much as the rest of the boys. He stayed down in the lowlands, mostly—always

during the winter. But it has seemed to me that he wasn't in with the rest of Tyrone's gang. I'm positive that he's dead against them now, after the way they treated him."

"When I first met you," said Lin, "you referred to Tyrone and his cow-punchers as a gang. Now you do it again. You promised to explain. Won't you now?"

"They're crooked, Lin," she said earnestly. "I know that they've robbed post offices and stores in this country, and held up a stage. That's what I meant when I called them a gang. And you can be sure that Tyrone will make an effort to rob you of your gold, now that he's failed in taking your claims away from you."

"M-m—do you think so, *mestiza*?"

"I'm positive of it."

"Then that settles that. You won't pack out any gold amalgam from the Pipe-organ."

"Oh, yes, I will! I want to. I'm not afraid of them. I might get by where a man would fail."

"How come?"

"Well"—she colored slightly—"if I do say it myself, some of the Tyrone Ranch boys like me pretty well."

"Oh! So that's the way of it, eh? Anybody in particular?"

"Well, you know how it is, Lin. I was the only girl they saw for months and months. And I guess—I guess Noah Littlejohn—now—well, wants me, you might say."

"Wants you, eh? Well, he can take it out in wanting. Say, if I wanted something, and had as lean a chance to get it as he has, I'd—I'd try to ride Shocking John again. But, honestly, *mestiza*, I don't think it advisable for you to try to pack the gold. I wouldn't have you take the risk."

"Do you think that I'm afraid?"

"That's just the trouble, Sister Joyce. You're too

confounded courageous. But say— Say, wait a minute! By golloy, I've got a scheme! And, say, she's a lolly-palluza, too! *Mestiza*, I've got the goods!"

"Well, tell me about it, can't you?" laughed the girl.

"Let me pat myself on the back a little longer and think it over," he pleaded. "I'll tell you to-morrow morning, when I'm cool, calm, and corrupt. To-morrow morning I'll pull the plug out of my brain pan and let the gems of thought flow through."

CHAPTER XXII

THE GUESSING GAME

THE pack saddles and bags came by express on the seven twenty-nine next morning. Lin's bags were loaded with supplies and already to be hung over the X's and diamond-hitched. Art Carey and Small John Copper went to work at once, adjusting cinches and harness, trying to limber stiff new pack ropes, and loading the bags at the store. It was nine o'clock before the double outfit was under way, and the thirty odd mules that composed it made a long line as they passed out of Porcupine and started over the undulating hills toward the high Sierra.

All of the men walked except Small John Copper and Art Carey. Agnes and Joyce rode, too, Lin having brought in a saddle for the girl from the city. The two girls rode together in rear of the outfit. Neither wanted to ride with the other, perhaps, but it seemed the logical and polite thing to do.

Before the end of that first day Agnes Deville was suffering, but she did not complain. Joyce glanced at her often as they rode along, realizing how the saddle was tormenting her, and pitied her. Just the same, she was obliged to admire her grit. The foothill winds were blistering her face, too, and it had grown red and tired looking. Joyce herself, by reason of her long familiarity with outdoor life in the mountains, was almost as fresh at the setting of the sun as when she had first set foot to her stirrup.

The untrained mules behaved nobly, probably because of the good example set for them by Tris Derry's string of patient old railroaders. They made Ten Oaks Creek as darkness fell, and pitched tents for the night.

While the men were at work Joyce suggested to Agnes that a cold bath in the rushing mountain stream would revive her immeasurably. So with towels and soap they walked down the creek, and were back in camp again twenty minutes later, with the city girl greatly refreshed.

All but Lin and Joyce retired early, after the evening meal was over. The girl did not know, however, that Lin was up. She was sitting on a down tree at the edge of camp, listening to the whispering of the stream. Above her the twisted branches formed a fantastic network against the sky, lighting gradually as the moon crept up above a distant mountain peak.

"Well?" said a familiar voice suddenly; and Lin Columbia sat down beside her. "Hope I'm not interrupting your girlish dreams."

"Not at all," she assured him. "But I thought you had gone to bed."

"We never sleep," he quoted. "Just waiting for the others to caress the quills. Wanted to gasp out that program I stumbled over yesterday. Listen?"

"Of course. You know I will."

"There's only one thing to do," he continued, "if you're sure that old Ozias is out to put jelly into my tart. If he wants that gold more than we do, he'll have to work for it. We're gonta fool 'im!"

"How?"

"Make him think we're doing one thing and be doing another."

"Go on—make yourself clear."

"We'll now have two pack outfits perambulating

from Porcupine to the Peddler's Crutch, won't we? Yours and Tris Derry's. Eh? Get me?"

"Of course, Lin."

"Fair enough. And which one will carry the gold?"

"Why—why, I'm sure I don't know."

"Neither will Ozias Tyrone, *mestiza*. Just suppose, for a kid, that we make it evident the gold is going out with you on a certain date. Not paste any printed notices to that effect, y'understand, but sort of let the information leak out. Savvy th' burro?"

"I don't believe I follow you," she said.

"Well, by what State prisoners would call 'the underground,' we'll loose the dope that you're taking out the amalgam. Maybe, if we're careful and pretend that we don't know the information has leaked out, it will get to the ears of a certain two-gun tragedian called Black Tyrone. Tyrone rallies his faithful band, and they lay for you and fall upon you, to find that the bags you're packing are filled with—iron, we'll say. Truth will be, of course, that the good stuff has already gone out with the other bunch.

"Then next time, maybe, he'll tackle Tris's outfit. This time the gold will be in your pack. Scratch his head—cuss, maybe—and try the guessing game. You know—guess which hand it's in and I'll give you a bite. Gets a hectic idea of what's going on. Chuckles in his black beard. Ah-ha! Ushers his cow dicks into the noble forest, lies in wait, muttering through his teeth. Ah-ha! Holds up both outfits. Stung! Lin Columbia has outguessed him a third time. No gold went out at all—still got it.

"Guesses again. First, he tried you. Failed. Then he tried Tris's rut dodgers. Failed again. Tried both. Failed miserably. Now which? You? No—the fellow that's trying to outguess him will send the gold out with the old outfit, as he did the first time. Calls

a council of war. Big argument. Make medicine. All decide Ozias is right—keen—there. Sally forth. Hold up Tris's bunch. Nipped the fourth time—outguessed again. Gold went out on the back of one lone man, whom nobody outside of the game knew anything about.

"Fool him a fifth time. Indulge in conversation to the effect gold is going out with Tris's mules. Ozias gets the dope. Send out scrap iron. Ozias gets wise—mighty wise—Solomon wise. Let Tris's bunch get by. Holds up you. Gets scrap iron. Switched on him at the last moment—see? Gold on its way to Porcupine with Tris. Nothing to it, *mestiza*. Keep it up forever. Outguess him every time. Got more brains than he has. Tumble?"

"But who will act as messenger to fool him?" asked the girl.

"His spy."

"You don't mean that Ozias Tyrone has a spy in your camp! Who can it be? Nobody has left the ranch to act the part, and Ozias has no friends at all in this country except the men who work for him. He doesn't mingle with the people of this country."

"Just that. I know it. Couldn't get anybody to act as spy for him—doesn't know anybody he would take into his confidence. That is, outsiders. So sends a man from Tyrone Ranch."

"But no man has left the ranch, Lin."

"Oh, yes—Brother Small John Copper has."

"Do you mean—"

"Of course. Plain as the mustache on a caterpillar. Fake scrap at the ranch. Whole bunch pick on Small John. Beats it with you, yapping about poor mother and sisters crying for food. Poor work. A polished plot that failed."

"But, Lin, I saw them—"

"Not a scratch on the little owl. Won't do. Fake

kicking and all that. Can't tell me! Ozias Tyrone would never kick a man when he's down."

"How do you know?"

"Read his eye. Mean, underhanded where money is concerned, but game to the core and fair in a man fight. Can't fool me, *mestiza*! I know his kind. Fought with 'em. Got licked a plenty, so I ought to know. Put on a little three-ring circus for you—see? All picked on the smallest man in the bunch—the only man belonging to Tyrone Ranch that I'd never seen. Thought they'd pretend to drive him away, and he was to come to me and ask for work. Spy—see? Let 'em know when the amalgam was to move.

"Then you horn in. Act awfully rude. Played your trey on their deuce spot. Withered Black Ozias. Wrecked his hind leg for him. Therefore—new plan is born. You've taken on a turmoil over the mistreatment of little Small John. Sorry for him. Boo-hoo! Poor mother and sisters. Crust of bread—all that hash. You spill it that you're going to help Lin Columbia. Well, then! Why not send little Small John along? Just the thing. Dazzling prospectus! You mother Small John in his dire extremity—give him a job. Fine! *If*—Lin Columbia hadn't seen him mailing a letter to Ozias Tyrone before we faded beyond the suburbs of Porcupine."

"Lin, you don't mean that!"

"Break my wishbone if I don't, *mestiza*! Curious about him—see? Watching him. Saw him drop his letter through the slot in Pearl's post office. Faked a reason for getting behind the what-d'e-call-it, checking up the shipment. Pearl mixes groceries and mail till he doesn't know which is which, anyway. Does his store bookkeeping in the post office. Bad practice.

"Looking over the bill of lading with him—sent him out in the store to get me a cigar to steady my nerves.

Went through the outgoing mail in the box under the slot. Located the destination of Small John's letter: 'Ozias Tyrone, Tyrone Ranch, Spruce, California.' Only Small John spells Spruce with two s's. Low-down trick. Against the law. Have to hang me, I guess. Le's go to bed now. Talk it over again tomorrow night, when we cross the Paddlefish and camp in Lodgeman's Pass. *Buenas noches, mestiza!"*

CHAPTER XXIII

FUNNY THINGS

BOTH Joyce and Agnes cried out with delight when finally the outfit wound its way through a garden of gigantic boulders and came out in a level forest country. Before them the tents of the construction camp snuggled at the feet of the enormous sugar pines and spruces. Past it rushed the green Pipe-organ, icy cold, boisterous, clear as crystal, alive with mountain trout.

Men came from the work, somewhere beyond the trees, to help with the unloading of the pack mules. Hay, grain, hams, sides of bacon, potatoes, sugar, rice, beans, were piled up promiscuously to await the proper distribution. Lin set other laborers to work at once pitching tents for Joyce and Agnes. Agnes had been taken to her brother, who was feeling far worse than the considerate Lin had intimated.

Joyce chose a site for her tent some distance from the main camp. Above the tent towered the magnificent trees, and the turbulent river raced past it. Ferns grew on the river banks, and the rocks were smooth and moss-grown. It was a picturesque spot, and already she loved it. Her mind was filled with plans as she oversaw the distribution of her few personal belongings.

Agnes had ordered her own tent set up on the other side of the camp. When she came out from greeting her bedridden brother, she discovered, for the first

time, that only a small portion of the contents of her several trunks had been brought along.

"Next trip and the next," Lin Columbia soothed her. "Take some time to get all of it out here. We need grub and feed too badly to give much room to ding-fods. Later, lady—later. Be patient with us. This isn't the Hotel St. Ignatius, you know."

"Ding-fods, nothing!" expostulated Agnes. "Things that are absolutely necessary have been left at Porcupine, Lin. I asked you to personally see to it that what I would need would be sent."

"Found so many funny things in your trunks that I got all fussed up and worried," he pleaded. "Silk things—clingy—slick—squeaky when I ran 'em through my fingers. Got scared to death and left them out. Gold gadgets—mirrors and brushes and things. Knocked me silly. Desecration to handle 'em. So I ostracized 'em. Get 'em later, though. 'There, there little girl—don't cry!' The *mestiza* is struggling along with what you could put in an oxford bag."

"Oh, is she, indeed? Well, it's barely possible that she is not accustomed to the things that I consider necessary."

"Sure—possible. Heat a pitchfork tine and curl her hair with it, I'll bet. Make a sofa cushion out of a gunnysack filled with dry grass. Redden her lips with wild strawberries and powder her nose with flour. Polish her shoes with oil and soot from the camp fire, and use horse liniment for perfume. Wait a minute—I'll get you some spruce gum to chew. Make your jaw muscles stick out like warts on a crookneck squash."

"I don't care for any, thank you. Neither do I care to be ridiculed."

"Now, now, now!" he said soothingly. "Don't fuss, Agnes. Remember you're a big girl now. Mother

Nature runs the beauty parlor. The Pipe-organ Company, Incorporated, conducts the Turkish baths. You can ride under a low-hanging limb and get your hair bobbed free of charge. Then you can go up on top of one of our hills, and as long as the winds blows you will have a permanent wave. Take the Pipe-organ country as you find it. Take her with a smile, and she'll smile back at you. But include this in your folio: Start something, and she'll finish it. Can't beat her—she's a bear-cat, Agnes!"

"I'm not in the humor to laugh at your nonsense," the girl said coldly. "I'm well aware that I'm not in the St. Ignatius. I expected to rough it up here and be deprived of many things; but I didn't expect to be deprived of *everything*."

"You're tired, that's what's the matter with you," he told her. "You've got buckaroo's cramp. You'll work into the scheme of life up here when your wounded dignity heals. You're fancifully exasperated with the world at large right now. You'll wake up to-morrow morning with your sympathies throbbing to play Aunt Stella to everybody between here and Flytrap Cañon. Why, by night we'll have to put a ring in your nose to keep you from kissing our mules! This land decoys a fellow, Agnes."

"Will you please have something made for me that I can use as a dresser?" she said crisply.

"Dresser—sure. Comin' up!" And he hurried away to order a log split in half, the flat side hewn smooth, and holes bored through the bark side in which were to be inserted legs.

That afternoon, while Agnes napped away her weariness, Joyce Larue rode with Lin from one end to the other of the road-building job, and was pleasurably surprised at the amount of work completed.

The new road fringed cañon after cañon after it

crossed the lower bend of the Pipe-organ. Steep, deep precipices hung below it, at the bottom of which the river rushed along on its hilarious pilgrimage to the Pacific Ocean. It extended through a country as difficult for road construction as anybody could imagine. The grade was good however, but the winter to come would bring on slides and falling trees, and hardship loomed ahead for whoever was to use it.

"Want to run a narrow-gauge railroad over this route some time," said Lin, as they sat in their saddles at the farthest point to which work had progressed and watched the laboring men and teams.

"Will it be possible?"

"Oh, yes. Just widen the crown and lay your steel. Have to wait till the main line comes through, though, so as to get steel and equipment into this country. Great game, isn't it?"

"Yes," she replied. "I love it. Let's ride on to the Flytrap and see the mines. I'm anxious for that. Are you going to be very rich some day, Lin?"

"Rich as Cræsus," he told her. "Have more presidential portraits in the bank than I'll know what to do with."

"Then what?"

Lin had swung his horse into the trail that led from the end of the work to the upper bend of the river and Flytrap Cañon. He turned in his saddle and looked back at her.

She was prettier than usual to-day, he thought. Her cheeks were full of color because of her enthusiasm over the new venture, and her large eyes were sparkling. He watched the velvety curves of her face as she looked sidewise into the yawning cañon of the Pipe-organ.

He sighed, scarcely knowing why.

"What do *you* think will happen then?" he asked.

"I'm sure I don't know," she told him demurely.

"I suppose you'll be a big mining man and live in San Francisco, and let less fortunate men do the work for you."

"Think so?"

"Yes. She'll never be content to live out here with you, Lin."

"Who's 'She'll'?" he asked.

"Agnes, of course." Joyce seemed quite interested in the sun-bathed top of a red hill of stone far away across the river.

Lin said nothing for a long time. Then, thoughtfully:

"No; she will have to have boys with brass buttons on their coats doing the chores for her. Nothing short of shaved ice *à la* Newburg will content her. She likes mezzanine floors and furs and diamonds and push buttons, bridge, soufflé, and scented soap; foreign dogs with foreign faces and foreign pedigrees; fifty-cent things that cost ten dollars, and ice-eyed clowns with frog lips to hand 'em to her on a silver platter.

"She's gonta get such a snootful of the Pipe-organ in the next few weeks that she will wish she was in an orphan asylum taking sulphur and molasses out of a tin spoon. She's gonta long for callouses on her feet that were put there by paved streets. She's gonta wake up at night cryin' because she can't hear a peanut roaster whistling outside her tent. She'll dream that the galloping of the Pipe-Organ is the rattle of a milk wagon at 4 A. M. Thaty gal's gonta long for smoke and soot and shrieking brakes like a burro longs for a red label off a tomato can. So what am I gonta do about it, *mestiza*?"

"You mean, then, that you're going to marry her?"

"She hasn't asked me yet," said Lin.

But Joyce could not smile. She looked off over the Pipe-organ at the sunny tip again, and softly asked:

"But you do love her, don't you, Lin?"

"Who, me?"

Joyce said nothing.

"I guess I do," he said, after a time. "And then, confound it, I don't know whether I do or not! Funny things—girls. I like you because you're there seventy-seven ways from Sunday. Like to see you on a horse; like to see you on your feet, walking with the idea of gettin' somewhere. Like you because of your capability, grit, endurance, gameness, freedom from conventionality, your attitude of being above all this confounded foolishness about imported perfumery, florists, country clubs, automobiles, parties, dances, powder puffs, and marcel waves.

"Like to see Agnes step into a limousine in high-heeled slippers, furs all about her till you can see only the diamonds in her hair. Like to see her dance—especially with me. Like her softness, her dependence on me, her tricky little ways, her love of imported perfumery, expensive flowers, parties, powder puffs, and séances with chiropodists, hairdressers, and manicures. Like to hear her fuss about nothing; like to hear you keep still about something big. Like you because you're serious—like her because she's frivolous. Wish I was a Mormon. Funny things—men."

He slued himself around in the saddle and looked at her soberly. Then, with one of his lightning changes, he asked:

"Won't be afraid to have Ozias hold you up, will you, *mestiza*? Sure no harm will come to you? Sure Ozias's men are fond enough of you to see that Ozias doesn't vent his spite on you?"

"I'm not afraid," she said.

He studied her face a little, then swung to the front again.

"Funny things—girls," he muttered. "M-m-m!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIRST TRIP IN

EARLY next morning the man in charge of the pack train which was composed of Tris Derry's mules started back over the long trail to Porcupine. Joyce probably would have merged her outfit with his, had it not been for Lin Columbia's brilliant plan to outwit Ozias Tyrone in the matter of transportation of the gold amalgam. Besides, she wished to rest her untried stock for at least a day before throwing them into work.

She, Lin, and the puffed-faced Jeffrey Deville had held a conference, and Jeff had at once agreed to the proposed rate of five cents a pound for freight. All three were obliged to admit that it was an almost prohibitive rate to pay; but the figures that the girl showed the men proved beyond a doubt that, after all expenses were paid, there would be very little profit on her investment remaining for her.

She convinced them that, exclusive of what she was entitled to demand for her own time, she would be extremely fortunate if she cleared thirty dollars a day for the four days' trip, coming and going. With the high price of feed, and considering that her mules must give place in their packs for hay and grain for their own consumption, and the four dollars a day and board that must go to Small John Copper and Art Carey, it would require careful management for

her to make even a decent income from her outlay of cash.

Both men realized that they were working in a hard, hard country, remote, difficult of access, and that frontier prices were inevitable. So, on top of it all, they offered the girl twenty-five dollars a day, or fifty dollars a trip, for carrying out the gold on occasions when it would be sent with her. This helped immeasurably, and Joyce was glad to thank them for their generosity.

Before the sun had smiled on the forest next morning she was in the saddle, helping Small John Copper and Art Carey to haze the mules into line. In some of the pack bags, under flakes of alfalfa hay and grain, reposed stout canvas bags, containing balls of hard amalgam, wrapped in paper to prevent them from sticking together. The estimated value of the shipment was in the neighborhood of twenty-one thousand dollars. The mistress of the cavalcade thrilled and felt a vast responsibility when she thought of it, which was mostly all the time.

She watched Small John Copper ceaselessly, but his wizened, twisted face was unreadable. Was Lin Columbia right? Had he really joined her to act as a spy for the black-bearded king of the mountains? He did not know now, so far as she was aware, that the gold was being sent out on this trip. She herself had stowed the heavy bags in the pack, and they were borne by mules who brought up the rear of the train. These mules she intended to handle herself, when it came time for the pack bags to be thrown off. She would contrive, some way, to hide the precious metal and sleep beside it. But her task was a difficult one, she realized.

She realized as well, now, that she was more afraid than she had imagined she would be when she con-

sented to carry the gold to Porcupine. She knew Ozias Tyrone—his determined, vindictive nature, his greed for money. It had seemed such an easy matter, back there in camp talking it over, to safely transport the treasure out of the wilderness. She had fondly imagined then that none of Ozias Tyrone's men would think of molesting her. Now she saw Noah Littlejohn as a relentless ogre, cruel, indifferent to the fate of his victim, concerned only in the betterment of his own condition.

The other *vaqueros* seemed as wicked as Noah and Ozias, only less likely to molest her unless commanded to by their leaders. What did any of them care for her, when twenty-one thousand dollars' worth of gold was at stake? They would kill her, if necessary, in order to get it.

And here, riding with her, was Small John Copper, ready to let them know when she was carrying gold—ready to help them get it away from her. What could she, a mere girl, do to prevent them from robbing her? She had been silly, stupid, ever to have considered for a moment that she would be able to play this important part.

And then she thought of Lin Columbia and of her love for him. Yes, she loved him. She admitted it freely now. She would do anything to help him—she would even give him up to Agnes Deville, she placidly told herself, in order to know that he was happy.

Then she would about-face and clinch her fists and tell herself that never, never would she give him up to her. She had come into that country to be near him and keep the other girl from winning him. She had come to show him that he needed her and what she had to offer more than he needed the city girl and her artificial charms. The only way to prove her right to him was to be of real help—to show up, by con-

trast, the weakness of her black-haired rival. And to do this she must carry the gold to Porcupine with a courageous heart.

She had not lost him yet, she told herself with a smile of satisfaction. He had been dazzled temporarily by the airs of this city girl. He would wake up presently and find out that she had nothing to offer him that he needed. Then he would be hers—Joyce's.

Even now he was undecided. He liked one of them for certain things, the other for certain things. These accomplishments, or characteristics, or results of environment—whatever had lured him—were in direct contrast. What Joyce had Agnes did not have, and *vice versa*. It was up to Lin to choose who possessed the characteristics that he admired most, and to find out, first, *what* he admired most. Joyce thought that she knew his heart better than he did himself. In time she would wake him up.

But what if he should marry Agnes in the meantime?

And thinking thus as she rode along, she began actually to hope that something would happen; that Ozias Tyrone would make an attempt—an unsuccessful attempt—to steal the gold amalgam. So she dreamed as her bay pony trudged along in the wake of the pattering mules on the lonely, chaparral-lined trail to Porcupine.

At noon, when the packs were taken from the backs of the mules, she contrived to have the entire outfit fed without opening the bags in which the gold was stowed. That night she fed her saddle horse and the four rear mules herself, and managed, while the men were watering the rest of the outfit, to sneak the bags into her tent, already pitched.

Her efforts at secretiveness became more difficult with the feeding next morning. The grain and hay were running low, since they had calculated the neces-

sary amount to a nicety, so as to arrive at their destination with empty bags.

Again, however, she was successful. But at noon that day, with Porcupine only thirteen miles from them, it became necessary to open the untouched bags, in order to round out the meal for the entire twenty mules.

She tried to attend to this herself, but Small John forestalled her. He had one set of bags off the trees before she could think of a reasonable excuse for stopping him.

"Gosh!" he puffed, as he set the second bag on the ground. "Heaviest alfalfa hay I ever handled. What's in these here bags, Miss Joyce?"

Joyce was trembling from head to feet as she dismounted from her horse, pretending not to hear. She could do nothing. She fussed with her cinch, watching the wizened little man out of the corners of her eyes, as he dumped the contents of the bag on the ground.

Out dropped a bag of gold amalgam, alighting with a toadlike thump.

"Great guns! What's this?"—from Small John Copper.

Then suddenly the girl remembered that there was no use to hide the truth from him—that Lin Columbia wanted him to know she was carrying the gold, so that he could transmit the information to his chief and give Lin the chance to fool him. What a relief to have thought of this just then!

"That," she said slowly, smiling down at the little man, "is a bag of gold amalgam, Small John. We are carrying four of them. If the contents of that bag were yours, you'd be richer by about five thousand bucks, my son."

Small John's little eyes widened until they were as large as the eyes of a normal man.

"Gosh A'mighty!" he breathed. "Ye don't mean that, Miss Joyce!"

"Surely," she returned lightly. "We're going to pack out all of the gold from the Pipe-organ mines, Small John. Got to watch our step, my boy. Got to keep it dark, you understand. We don't want anybody to hold us up and take it away from us."

"And ye got four of 'em, Miss! Twenty thousan' dollars!"

"Over that, Mr. Columbia told me. Something like twenty-one thousand. Wish it were yours?"

"Huh! Sure do. But ain't ye worried a little, Miss Joyce?"

"I? Poo! Not in the slightest, Small John. But let's forget it now, and throw a feed into these shave-tails. We've twelve miles ahead of us yet, and the stock is tired."

Small John blinked his faded-blue eyes and said no more as he busied himself at feeding the braying mules. Joyce watched him more carefully than ever now, but, as before, his inscrutable little brown face, under the enormous Stetson, showed none of his emotions.

They reached Porcupine that evening without an untoward event. Joyce immediately gave the amalgam into the keeping of Ralph Pearl, who placed it in his safe until he could ship it by express next morning to Henry McDade in San Francisco. Lin and Jeff had made arrangements with him to receive their shipments of amalgam and have it retorted for them before transferring it to the mint, because as yet they had no facilities for retorting their product in the Pipe-organ Country.

Joyce gave Small John Copper slight opportunity to be alone until darkness settled down. She hung

about the corral while the two men were attending to the tired mules, and did not go to the hotel until supper-time. Small John and Art accompanied her, and she ate at the same table with them. Afterward she sat on the veranda, pretending to be merely resting from her long ride, but in reality watching to see if the little cow-puncher would mail a letter to Tyrone Ranch.

He, Art Carey, and three natives were playing a game of penny-ante in the so-called lobby of the hotel. She heard their voices, the click of chips, and the sputter of cards through the half-open window. Finally, deciding that for her to remain longer away from her room would look suspicious, she went inside, bade them good night, and climbed the creaking, uncarpeted stairs to the boxlike little quarters that were to be hers when her outfit was at Porcupine.

But she did not undress and go to bed. She felt sleepless, despite the hardships of the day just passed. She sat by a window and saw the light streaming upon the ground from the front of the lobby below her. There she sat, watching, thinking—thinking about Lin Columbia and his fortunes, and how she could help him to realize his great ambition. She did not just know what his great ambition was, but, whatever it might be, she wanted him to win out in the struggle and that he should be happy.

She knew when the poker game broke up below her. One by one she heard the men ascending the noisy stairway, heard others shuffling out into the night to seek their various homes.

Now all was silent throughout the house. But still the dim light continued to stream through the ground-floor windows under her. She heard the occasional movement of a foot. Somebody was alone in the lobby, reading or attending to some business with which no

one but himself was concerned. Then she heard the soft opening of the front door—saw a dim bulk slide out into the night. She was able to watch it as it moved briskly in the direction of the store. In her heart of hearts she knew that Small John Copper had written a letter to Ozias Tyrone, and had gone to drop it through the mail slot that opened on the veranda of Ralph Pearl's store.

She sighed as the man came softly back, passed across the shaft of light coming from the windows, and revealed himself as the little puncher from Tyrone Ranch. He entered the hotel. The lights went out. Then she heard him close the door and steal lightly across the veranda, in his pliable cowboy boots, on the way to his tent.

She knew that the letter he had written contained a message to Ozias Tyrone, notifying him of the shipment of gold, and advising that all future shipments would be carried by her.

Well, she was ready for the outcome—whatever it might be. She was forewarned, anyway, and that helped a little. She was ready because the man she loved expected her to be ready. She was ready to help him to the last atom of her energy and courage. She wondered, with a smile, if Agnes Deville, placed in her shoes, would be ready. She undressed silently and went to bed.

CHAPTER XXV

EIGHT CANVAS BAGS

THE trip back to the Pipe-organ was uneventful. Relieved of worry over the gold amalgam, Joyce Larue gave herself up to complete enjoyment of the journey. She loved mules and horses, and delighted in caring for them, in fussing about them, in conversations concerning them with Art Carey and Small John Copper. She was quicker than either of the men at throwing on the one-man diamond hitch and the squaw hitch. She could read the symptoms of an ailing mule better than could Small John Copper, who considered himself an expert horseman.

The season was marching rapidly on. The bright-green leaves of the buckeye trees, the first to appear in spring, were well advanced in size, and the trees made great splotches of color over the hillsides and in the cañons. The gray squirrels were busy. Wild canaries and linnets sang ceaselessly. At evening young jack rabbits frolicked in the moonlit dust of the trail.

The creak of saddle leather under the girl was a sound that she loved. She loved, too, the feel of her horse, loved to watch the rolling backs of the long train of mules ahead of her.

Every foot of the long trip through this delectable wilderness was a pleasure. And then on the evening of the second day out of Porcupine—for, since the cutting of the brush and the leveling of the trail, it

was now only a two days' trip—the weary outfit wove its way down from the Peddler's Crutch, and the mules set up a clamorous braying as they neared the camp on the banks of the lower Pipe-organ.

When the pack bags were unloaded, the stock cared for, and the tired travelers had partaken of supper in the grimy dining tent, Joyce sought out Lin Columbia to make her report.

She found him in the office tent, which served as well as sleeping quarters for Jeff and Lin. The former was lying on his bed, his face still puffed and swollen, but recovering slowly from his first dose of poison oak. The girl and Lin sat down, facing each other across the pine table that served as a desk. Jeffrey Deville listened to every word that passed between them, now and then making a remark.

"Well," said the girl, "I brought back about four thousand pounds of freight, and everything seems to be all right. The gold amalgam I delivered to Mr. Pearl, and I know that it was on its way to San Francisco before we started back next morning. But Small John Copper got onto me. I couldn't keep him from seeing the bags; and when he asked what was in them, I had to tell him."

"Of course," said Lin. "Natural thing to do, *mes-tiza*. Wanted him to know. So that's all right."

"The night we got in," she continued, "I watched him. I am positive that he mailed a letter to Ozias Tyrone. Of course, I'm not positive, either; but I'm willing to bet my last cent on it."

"Safe bet," decided Lin. "Of course he'd do that, after learning that you had packed in the gold amalgam. You passed the other outfit on your way in, of course."

"Yes—just this side of the Paddlefish River. And on our way here to-day we passed it, going in, shortly

after we'd crossed the upper fork of the Stranger," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"Did you send out any gold with them?"

"Yes—about ten thousand dollars' worth. Figured, you see, that Ozias wouldn't know about this transportation until he received notice from Small John Copper. Thought we'd sneak out all we could while the sneaking is good. Hated to trust the fellow who is in charge of Tris Derry's pack train, though. Tris has known him for some years, he tells me, and thought it was safe to trust him. Just the same, we hadn't done so until you came.

"Now, if he should go fluttering out of this country with our ten thousand dollars' worth of gold, you'll be only a day behind him. You can set the dogs of war on his trail pronto. But we're paying him extra to be a good boy, and maybe he'll remember his mother's teachings and not spring a leak. But if he does, *mestiza*, be prepared to slip the sheriff the sad news as soon as you ramble in. That's up to you."

"I'll do my best."

"I'm betting that way. Thank you kindly, lady. I wish we knew how soon Ozias will receive Small John's intellectual effort, though. Depends on how often they're going from the ranch to Spruce these days. Pretty frequently is the answer, I guess. Expecting to hear something—make me? Maybe got that letter now. Be pussyfooting over this way soon. Take a day and a half for the trip. You'll leave to-morrow morning. Maybe Ozias is already camped beside the trail, chewin' his black whiskers and fretting copiously. Cheerful, *mestiza*?"

"I can't say that I'm anxious for it to happen," replied Joyce. "But I'm ready. I don't expect to be harmed."

"Wouldn't fight or anything like that, would you?"

"I don't know what I'd do, Lin. I—I'm sort of impulsive sometimes."

"You mustn't for a moment consider offering any resistance," put in Jeff Deville.

"Not even when I'm actually carrying the gold?" she asked.

"Not under any conditions," he returned positively. "Let them get the gold, if necessary, but don't you take any risk whatever."

"'Course not," muttered Lin. "Keep cool, calm, and corrupt, and don't try any trigger tête-à-tête with Black Ozias. No game for a girl—even a brave girl. Climb the ladder, do whatever you're told to do, and wait till the clouds roll by. Jeff"—he turned to his partner—"I've got a hunch the black fellow has received that masterpiece and is now on his way to the trail to Porcupine. We got about thirty thousand to send out. Get that off our hands, and we'll be cleaned up for the present. Didn't like to trust Tris's stiff with more than the ten thousand he took. Shall we send out the whole shootin' match with Joyce to-morrow? We need money in the bank, play-fellow."

"You ask that when you think it possible that Ozias and his gang may be on the job before Miss Larue reaches Porcupine?" asked Jeff.

"I wonder," mused Lin, "if it will be possible to fool Small John Copper, Joyce." Lin seemed not to have heard his partner's question, or, if he had, he disregarded it completely. He continued to the girl: "Say, you let Small John know you've got the gold. Tell him you've got four bags of it. Do this before you leave camp to-morrow mornin'. Then slip four bags of iron into the pack and let him see it go in. Sneak your four bags of amalgam on the backs of other shave-tails. Don't let his nibs toddle to that—gather me?

Ozias comes, sticks you up, gets the four bags of iron and fidgets away with them. Doesn't stop to examine the contents, of course. Hankers to put a lot of country between you and himself before he permits himself an eye feast. Hesitates on the homeward trail; opens the bags for a look-see. Treats his eyes to a panorama of old horseshoes and blacksmith's odds and ends. Won't go back and try to stick you up again. Thinks he's gypped. You meander on peacefully to Porcupine with the goldenrods, with little Small John none the wiser.

"Time elapses. Got a way of doin' that. Another trip pulled off, maybe, before Small John finds out that the black-whiskered noose-dodger has suffered a slight miscalculation. Gets a letter written with pen dipped in fire, tellin' him the gang has no yearnings for rusty horseshoes and ends of round iron bars. John thinks: 'By golly!'—or more impressive words to the same effect—"that gold went out with Derry's outfit. Can you copper it? Stung!"

"So he writes to Black Ozias and advises holdin' up the other bunch, traveling in a day ahead of you. Ozias tries it—gets nothing. No gold goin' out for quite a time. Guesses again. Camps in the mountains to be ready for either outfit. Holds up both. Gets nothin' again. Rests. Guesses. Wonders."

"Then what?" asked Jeffrey.

"I don't know," Lin replied. "Wait till then comes, unfortunate one. In the meantime, I'll think some more."

Silence fell. Joyce finally broke it.

"Have you the gold in camp now?" she asked.

"Sure—brought her down yesterday. Cached out in the forest, handy. Got another whim. Oversleep to-morrow, Joycie. Get up all sore about it. Easy to pull off. When little Small John pipes all hands for

the frolic to Porcupine, answer sweetly, then turn over and slumber on. Get late start—see? Necessary, in order to make up for lost time, for that clown called Linneus Columbia to help throw on the packs. Linneus Columbia, though a clown, contrives to slip the gold into certain pack bags known to you, while you let little Small John know about the iron that he's supposed to think is gold. All set—send you off with my blessin'."

"But how will Small John let Ozias know what pack bags to investigate?" questioned Jeff.

"Don't ask me—ask him," suggested Lin.

"I don't see any reason why Tyrone won't look into every bag," Deville persisted.

"Won't want to waste time," Lin explained. "Want to finish the business and surge back into the mountains with all convenient speed. Maybe we got a bunch of gunmen followin' the pack train—he doesn't know. There are a lot of us up here. He'll be nervous. You've never been a hold-up man, Jeffrey dear, so you don't understand the workings of the black man's mind."

"Have *you* ever been one, Lin?"

"Not yet," Lin retorted. "But I'm a gosh whoppin', swivel-eyed old jersey for usin' that battery substance the Lord put between my horns. You'll think I hate myself, I know; but I'm just naturally clever and admit it myself. Go on now! Everything's settled. That's the way we'll do it. Gold for the San Francisco mint—horseshoes for Black Ozias."

"But, Lin," asked Joyce, "won't scraps of iron rattle?"

"Roll 'em in clay, and make balls like amalgam. Then wrap the balls heavily in paper. But, excuse me, mule lady—it's time you were pressin' hay. I wish you fond dreams for the night. Try dreamin' about me once. Bring you luck. Good night!"

As Joyce left the tent she found herself facing Agness Deville, who was just on the point of entering. "Good evening," she said, stepping aside. Agnes had not been at the dinner table that night, nor had Joyce seen her before since her return from the trail.

It struck her that the voice of the dark-haired girl trembled slightly as she returned the greeting. Nothing further passed between them. Agnes entered the office tent, and Joyce sought her own remote quarters down the river. But she wondered, as she prepared for bed, at the strange shakiness in the tones of the other girl. Was she jealous because she had been with Lin and her brother, talking over business matters with which she had no concern?

Joyce learned next morning, however, that Agnes had, in a sort of preliminary manner, taken up her duties as office assistant to Lin and her brother, and that the shipment of gold was something of her concern, after all.

Everything worked out satisfactorily next morning, so far as was concerned that part of Lin Columbia's scheme which was to take place in camp. Joyce answered Small John Copper when he called her, telling him that she would be right out. Then she turned over in her bunk and slept again.

The entire camp had finished breakfast before she entered the dining tent. Lin was there, and sat and talked with her while she ate with deliberation. Then they both bustled forth. Small John and Art Carey had not made a practice of saddling the mules until the animals had completed their morning meal. It was not a lengthy job, and Joyce thought that the shavetails enjoyed their feed more when not cinched up. She and Lin walked rapidly through the pines to the corral.

Carey and Small John were already at work, and,

to the dismay of the schemers, all of the mules were saddled and the bags were filled with hay and grain for the trip in.

"I gotcha," muttered Lin, as the two hurried toward them. Then he lifted his voice to Copper and his companion.

"Listen, you birds," he said. "Got a busted wheeler that the blacksmith can't fix. Gotta send her in this trip to be repaired in Sacramento. See that Pearl ships her, Joyce. And, Copper, you and Carey hot-foot it over to Blackie's and get it. Make it snappy, please—you're late this morning."

The two men moved off in the direction of the blacksmith shop. When they were out of sight, Lin signaled the girl to follow him and hurried into the trees. There, to the complete surprise of Joyce, they found Agnes waiting for them, with four filled canvas bags lying at her feet.

"Everything ready, Agnes?" asked Lin.

The dark girl nodded.

"All right. You slip around and get back to the office tent. Joyce and I will load the gold."

Agnes turned away and vanished in the timber. Taking one of the heavy bags under each arm, Joyce and Lin bore them back to the mules.

"Quick!" he told her. "Help me get 'em into the pack bags, under the hay and grain. Don't make any mistake about which mules are packin' 'em."

The two worked rapidly, and soon the amalgam was concealed.

"Now we'll go to my tent and get the iron scraps," said Lin. "Got 'em all ready. Just about catch up with Carey and Small John as they're coming back. Have to lie again, I guess. C'mon!"

He led the way rapidly to the office tent, and as they came out, each bearing two heavy canvas bags

filled with odds and ends of iron pressed into balls of clay, they saw the two wranglers returning from the blacksmith shop.

"Says he don't know nothin' about any wheeler that he can't fix," reported Small John.

"Th' hell!—I mean, doesn't he? But, say—of course he doesn't. I'll bet that wheeler was never brought in from the grade. Well, too late now to get it. Send her in next trip. Hurry up, you boys. Gotta get this gold stowed away and beat it, or you'll be mighty late ramblin' into camp to-night."

Joyce thought that she detected a strange gleam in Small John's eyes as Lin spoke of the gold. But he said nothing as he relieved the girl of the portion of the burden that she carried.

The quartet made haste back to the corral, where Lin ordered the heavy bags of scrap iron stowed in the packs of certain mules that he knew were to travel at the head of the column.

Joyce swung into her saddle. Lin reached up and squeezed her hand.

"Good luck!" he whispered.

Then Joyce and her men began rounding up the mules and hazing them into line for the long trip back to the fringe of civilization. And Small John Copper grinned as he spurred his horse after a mule that had decided he preferred camp life to the chaparral-lined trail to Porcupine.

A day passed. Another morning came. Dusk found the belated cavalcade approaching the Paddlefish. They were high up above the level of the river, worming their slow way among huge red rocks which overhung the deep earth scar that the Paddlefish had gouged in the eternal hills for untold centuries. The trail at last led down and down toward the river's brim. The sun had gone. The cañon was dark, the

air lifeless. Sounds carried far through the dense forest. The cantankerous chuckling of a gray squirrel floated to the ears of Joyce Larue from a mile away.

A stone dropped into the trail, bounced over the cliff into the crystal water. A mule snorted, half wheeled in his tracks. A sudden brisk clattering of hoofs, then:

“Hands up! Climb!”

And six masked men, barely seen through the gloom, rode down into the trail, guns held waist-high and ready for instant action.

CHAPTER XXVI

A LETTER FROM SAN FRANCISCO

JOYCE LARUE found that she was not greatly frightened at the sudden appearance of the highwaymen in the darkening trail. She seemed numb, lifeless, and it was with an effort that she obeyed the command of the spokesman and raised her hands above her head.

Through the dimness of late dusk she saw that Small John Copper and Art Carey were both holding their hands aloft. Small John had been riding at the head of the column of mules, Carey about midway in the column. Joyce herself usually rode in the rear, as on the present occasion.

The highwaymen moved their horses forward with easy deliberation. Three of them dismounted. The other three kept in their saddles and watched the drivers of the train through the holes in their masks. The three who were on the ground went at the packs of the foremost mules, lifting them off and digging into them with both hands.

Her brain was working more clearly now. She tried to pierce the disguises of the highwaymen who were nearest to her. But to no avail. The gloom of the cañon that they had entered concealed the clothes that the men wore, and masks covered their faces. She thought that the black whiskers of Ozias Tyrone might show at the edges of his mask, so she allowed her glance

to rove from one to the other of them in search of him. But she was unable to say positively that he, or anybody that she knew at Tyrone Ranch, made one of the party. It was too dark for her to see what was taking place much farther ahead than the middle of the train. She imagined, however, that at least one of the hold-up men had held a guarded conference with Small John Copper. But she could not be quite sure of this.

It required a surprisingly short time for the highwaymen to get what they wanted. In less than four minutes after they had ridden down into the trail, the three who had dismounted to rifle the bags were in their saddles again. Some command, the words of which she could not distinguish, was given to Small John Copper. Then the six horses were suddenly wheeled, and a moment later the gang disappeared in the direction whence they came.

Small John Copper and Art Carey, as if commanded to do so, continued to keep their hands above their heads. For a little Joyce followed their example, then became disgusted with the indignity of it and lowered her aching arms. Nothing happened. She felt like screaming with relief or satisfaction or nervousness, she could not tell just which.

She knew that the bags of gold had **not** been touched—that Ozias Tyrone's gang had made away with bags containing scrap iron. It was plain to her that Small John Copper had whispered the information that the outlaws needed. Though they had removed at least a dozen sets of pack bags, this, the girl felt certain, had been done for a blind—to protect Small John. They had known just where to look for the ones that they imagined contained the gold. They had not stopped to investigate other pack bags as soon as they had found the four canvas containers they were after.

Small John had lowered his hands and was now rid-

ing back to her, bawling at the pack mules to stand aside and give his horse room on the trail.

"Well, what d'ye know 'bout that, Miss Joyce?" he cried in insincere tones when he neared her. "They got the stuff—all four bags. By golly, ain't that a shame!"

Joyce tried to act. The darkness aided her. She covered her face with her hands, and by speaking brokenly through her fingers gave out the impression that, if not actually crying, she was immeasurably disturbed.

"Oh, Small John," she mumbled, "what shall we do? What shall I do?"

"Ye can't do nothin', Miss Joyce," he returned soothingly. "It wasn't none o' your fault. Me an' Art can swear to that. What could ye do, with three hombres settin' in their saddles ready to smoke ye up if ye made a move? Ye did jest right when ye did jest what they told ye to. A fella's life is worth more'n any amount o' gold, Miss Joyce. That was a bad outfit, believe me! I didn't feel like divin' f'r my smoke-iron—not a-tall. I know when I got th' worst of it—and I ain't no coward, neither."

"No, of course not, John. I—I guess it couldn't be helped. But I feel as if I should have made an effort to save the gold. Who on earth were they, do you suppose?"

"That's sure got me puzzled, too," he told her. "And how in th' dickens did they know we was carryin' gold to Porcupine? That there postmaster at Porcupine—this Ralph Pearl—I'll bet he couldn' keep his mouth shet. I c'n jest see his gray billy-goat whiskers workin' up and down while he was spreadin' th' news all over th' country."

"Oh, he wouldn't do that, surely, Small John! Lin Columbia told me to caution him to keep the shipments secret. He promised me faithfully that he would."

"Well, somebody talked—that's a cinch. She's leaked out. I'll bet that outfit came from Nevady, Miss Joyce, jest to pull off that stunt. They's some bad gangs over in there, they tell me."

"Small John," she asked plaintively, "you don't think it possible, do you, that Ozias Tyrone and the boys from the ranch could have done this?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Miss Joyce. They're pretty bad actors, I know. Look what they done to me! But—"

"I know they're crooked, Small John. I told Ozias so the day before I left, when you had your trouble with them in the corral. I have known a few things about them for a long time, but I'd said nothing until that day, when I lost my head."

"Well, I know they ain't jest what they might be, Miss Joyce," John admitted, seeing that it was useless to claim that the Tyrone outfit was entirely pure and blameless. "I know a few things myself. But I never said nothin'. It wouldn't 'a' been right healthy for me to say anythin'. So I jest kept still and 'tended to my own business. I had to, ye know, with my mother and sisters dependin' on me. I didn't dast open my face fer fear o' losin' my job. I hope ye don't think that I was in on any o' their crooked work, Miss Joyce. I hope ye never thought that."

"No, I never did, John," the girl lied shamelessly. "You weren't at the home ranch as much as the others, you know, and I saw less of you than of them. I have always considered you straight."

"I thank ye, Miss Joyce. And ye didn't make no mistake in doin' it, neither. But I'm a man that 'tends to his own business. I don't squeal. Maybe it ain't right to do that way, but that's how I'm built."

"Well," said Joyce, at the conclusion of a long pause, "what has happened has happened. We can do

nothing. We're extremely late. Let's hurry on to the Paddlefish and camp. I can do no more than go on to Porcupine and get our load, then make it back to the Crutch and tell my sad story. But I'd rather be shot, honestly! Start 'em up, my son, and let's get settled for the night. The mules are growing hungry and restless."

The train was started again and worked its way briskly down to the river, where the outfit's camp awaited them. Joyce contrived once more to keep her helpers from discovering the bags that held the gold, which were in the packs of the two hind mules. She smuggled them into her tent while Small John and Carey were watering the stock. Highly pleased with the outcome of the entire performance, she went to bed that night, with the gold close beside her, and slept soundly until Art Carey called her in the morning.

Once more noon was approaching, and all of the feed had been consumed except that which was carried by the six last mules of the train. Small John must not see the bags this time, and the girl was at her wits' end to keep him from doing so. She had a vague plan, however, which she meant to try. When they camped for noon she meant to try and smuggle the bags out of the pack, hide them beside the trail, and continue on to Porcupine without them. That night, when Small John and Carey were asleep, she meant to mount her horse and ride back to get them. This would impose a double task on her patient saddle animal, and rob herself of much needed sleep. But she was willing to make the sacrifice. She was bound and determined to serve Lin Columbia.

Once more she found it possible to hold the two rear mules while the men watered the others. She had specified that Carey should attend to certain animals of the train, Small John to others, and that she herself

would look out for the ones that moved immediately ahead of her in the column. So while the men were leading by the halter ropes their apportioned bunches to the reservoir which they had made below the spring, she dived hurriedly into the last two sets of bags. She threw flakes of hay right and left, and with no small effort lifted the precious burdens to the ground. Sagebrush grew close to the road, and it was the work of but a few moments to pitch the gold bags into hiding. A minute after the wranglers had started for the spring, she was leading her mules along in the footsteps of the others.

Small John attended to the feeding while she and Art Carey kindled a fire and made preparations for the noonday meal. At one o'clock they were off again, and at dusk the braying outfit wormed its slow way to the front of the store at Porcupine.

A few hurried words to Ralph Pearl, and the absence of the gold bags was partially explained. Joyce held a consultation with him that evening, and he offered her the use of another saddle horse for her night trip back along the trail. Shortly after supper in the hotel, and even before Carey and Small John had betaken themselves to their tents for the night, the girl slipped over to the store, found the saddled horse behind it, waiting for her, and vaulted into the saddle.

The horse was not only a good traveler, but entirely fresh. So she sent him along at a brisk gallop for mile after mile through the darkness. Before nine o'clock, she had reached her trailside camp. She found the heavy bags and lifted them up, tying them to the saddle horn and behind the cante. She mounted hurriedly and urged her horse back toward Porcupine, reaching the little station before midnight.

Ralph Pearl ordinarily slept in his own hotel, but to-night he occupied a bunk in the store, which he

sometimes used in an emergency when, during the trout season, his hotel would be filled to overflowing. He awoke readily at the girl's soft knock on the door. And shortly after her arrival the bags were reposing securely in his old-fashioned iron safe.

"Ye're a wonder, Miss Joyce," he said, as he took the reins from her hand and bade her good night. "Ye're a wonder—that's all. Ye'll be in the saddle ag'in at six-thirty. Can't keep this up long. Ye gotta have yer sleep in order to do th' rough stuff ye're doin'. And you only a girl!"

"Don't worry about me, Mr. Pearl," she laughed. "I'm young and strong. I don't require much sleep. And I was born in a saddle, almost. Good night."

The trip back to the camp at the Peddler's Crutch was without an exceptional incident. Lin Columbia was jubilant over the outcome of the holdup. His boyish praise of the girl brought the color to her cheeks.

Joyce had seen very little of Agnes Deville since they rode together from Porcupine. When in camp on the upper Pipe-organ, Joyce, of course, had sat at the table with the dark-haired girl. But not since their arrival had she had an opportunity to speak with her when others were not close to listen. On the evening of her return after the holdup, however, she found herself alone with Agnes directly after they had left the dining tent. Jeffrey, Lin, Tris Derry and the two girls ate together at a private table. All left the tent at once, but by chance the men immediately drifted away to various tasks, leaving the two walking side by side.

Joyce broke the silence that had at once fallen between them.

"Well," she asked, "how is camp life treating you?"

"Very well," Agnes replied primly. "Of course I miss a lot that I have been accustomed to. But every-

body is so good to me that I haven't time to feel discouraged over anything."

"Are you working?" asked Joyce.

"Yes, I'm keeping the books. I'm learning to type, too. In time I expect to make an efficient office woman." She smiled, a little coldly, it was true, at her companion. "Lin says he couldn't get along without me, even now," she added. Then Joyce saw her bite her lip, as if she regretted the somewhat childish speech. "I suppose you are satisfied with your lot?"

"Oh, yes," said Joyce complacently. "I'm quite accustomed to outdoor hardships, you know. I delight in what you perhaps would consider pretty hard lines."

"No doubt you do," murmured Agnes significantly. "Well, I must go to the office, if you'll excuse me. I have some pretty important work to do to-night. Good-by."

"Good-by. The best of luck!"

"Thank you." Agnes hurried away, to disappear between the flaps of the tent where Lin and her brother held forth.

"She's got the best of it, after all," Joyce muttered, as she followed her with her glance. "She's with him every day—all the time—while I'm hitting the dusty trail to Porcupine and back. You didn't plan very skillfully, Joyce."

She laughed a little bitterly as she sought her own tent and settled down for the night.

Two days later, covered with dust and saddle-weary, she rode into Porcupine behind her grunting mules. Ralph Pearl handed her a letter postmarked San Francisco. Also she saw him give one into the hands of Small John Copper, whose face was, as usual, inscrutable as he walked away with it.

Joyce sat down on the veranda bench and tore open

the envelope. Her red lips parted as she read the following:

MISS JOYCE LARUE,

Porcupine, California:

My dear Miss Larue—My friend, Jeffrey Deville, in order to save time, instructed me to write direct to you in the event that it became necessary to advise him and his partner when anything went wrong regarding their shipments of gold amalgam to me. Something has gone wrong this time, and I am notifying you immediately.

Even now there is nothing much that I can write beyond a plain statement of fact. And the fact is, I am sorry to report, that your last shipment of canvas bags contained nothing but bits of iron and clay, wrapped well in old newspapers.

I trust that nothing serious has happened. I shall eagerly await your explanation of this seeming phenomenon.

With best wishes and hopes for the best,

Sincerely yours,

HENRY McDADE.

CHAPTER XXVII

BY CANDLE LIGHT

JOYCE LARUE stared at the letter from Henry McDade, then, with brow contracted, she gazed off over the rolling hills toward the mystic country of the Pipe-organ. She shook her head and read the letter once more. No, there could be no mistake. The canvas bags that she had guarded so carefully, for which she had sacrificed so much, had contained nothing but iron scraps when they reached San Francisco.

What could be the meaning of it all? She knew that the bags intended for Ozias Tyrone and his gang had been packed by four of the mules that marched near the head of the column. Those containing the treasure had been on the backs of the last two mules of the train, and constantly under her watchful eyes. That is, by daylight. And she had kept them at her side while she slept at night.

It was not possible for Lin Columbia to have made a mistake in stowing them in the pack bags—scarcely possible for the pack bags to have become mixed. But in some mysterious manner the bags containing iron had found their way to the backs of the two rear mules, and the others—the ones containing the gold amalgam—had been carried off by Black Ozias and his greedy followers.

No wonder Ozias had not attempted another hold-up of her outfit before it reached Porcupine. She had been afraid that this might happen, when the black-

bearded ranchman found that he had been outwitted. This had made another good reason for her secretion of the bags beside the trail, later to return for them in the middle of the night.

She sat there, stunned, scarcely able to believe what she had read. Then she remembered the letter that Small John Copper had received when she was handed hers by the postmaster. Had Ozias written to him, notifying him that everything was all right?

She rose quickly to her feet. She could accomplish nothing by sitting there in a daze. What could she do? Small John Copper, beyond a doubt, was the only person within reach who could explain this mystery. She could not take his letter away from him and read it. What then *could* she do?

She clattered down the rough steps of the veranda in her high-heeled riding boots. She started running as her feet touched the ground. She had seen Small John take his letter into the tent which he shared with Arthur Carey. Carey was attending to the last details of making the mules and horses comfortable for the night. The badgered girl scarcely knew what she was about, but she continued to run swiftly toward the sleeping tent of the men, hoping that, in some way, she might find out something to help her.

Art Carey was busy and did not see her coming. Her feet made no noise on the soft, green pasture grass. She reached the tent, the flaps of which hung close together. She hesitated an instant, reached out a hand to part the flaps, then quickly dropped it to her side and began stealing around to the back.

Anything that she might do to help Lin Columbia and protect herself seemed justifiable. She would hesitate at nothing now. She reached the back of the tent, where she was hidden from anybody who might be at the store and from Art Carey as well. With-

out a qualm of conscience, so greatly perturbed and excited was she, that she sank to the ground, and carefully lifted one of the canvas walls of the tent a trifle. Lying prone on the grass, she lowered her head to the earth and peered inside.

Evening was well along, and for a little her eyes could not make out much. Then the bulky object at which she was looking came to resemble the little cow-puncher, who was seated on a camp stool close to one of the side walls, reading his letter in the dim light that streamed in through a hole in the canvas. If Small John had been less illiterate he would have finished reading his letter long before. This item alone was what had given the girl her chance to see him engaged with it. And even as she looked he ceased pointing out the words with a stubby forefinger, arose with a deep sigh and struck a match. She thought that his fingers were trembling as he held the blaze to a candle thrust into the neck of a beer bottle. In the flickering light she saw him hurriedly drag the camp stool to the drygoods box on which the candle reposed, sink into it, and begin devouring the letter again.

His brown, leathery face was no longer the inscrutable face of the Small John Copper that she had known. The puckered lips were parted wide. The cocked, milk-blue eyes were fairly bulging from his head. The calloused fingers of one hand twined and intertwined themselves in his ragged hair as he read on and on slowly. His pigeon breast heaved spasmodically.

At last he dropped the letter on the table and sat staring at it, a bewildered, stunned look on his twisted countenance. He picked it up again, and for the second time a trembling finger pointed out the words, traveling slowly along the lines.

He dropped the letter listlessly, heaved a great sigh as of utter misery, and rose to his feet. He stood a

moment, apparently undecided. Then came the voice of Art Carey calling him.

"Aw right!" he responded.

He thrust the letter in a side pocket of the sweater that he wore, and, mumbling to himself, parted the tent flaps and walked out.

The girl sprang to her feet. Keeping the tent between her and the corral as much as possible, she backed away until she was some distance from it, then began walking leisurely toward the store.

She must manage in some way to read that letter. If Small John kept it in the pocket of his sweater that night, she meant to make a wild effort to possess herself of it. She knew in her heart that it had come from Ozias Tyrone, that it contained news of the stolen gold. The gold had been stolen from her keeping. She would do anything—even steal and read a letter from the man whom she suspected of being in league with the robbers—in order to help her out of her difficulty.

Thinking deeply, she reached the store and entered it. She saw Ralph Pearl seated behind the mailbox rack, his gray whiskers billy-goating up and down as he gave his attention to a piece of writing in his hand. Joyce stepped to the window.

"I'd like to speak with you a minute, Mr. Pearl," she said. "May I come in?"

"Sure—sure," he invited. "Come right into th' sanctum, Miss Joyce. Jest lookin' over a little bill for forty-seven dollars that a certain party owes me, and which I never calcalate to get. Forty-seven thirty-five, by golly! Sure—come right in."

Joyce opened the door and passed behind the boxes. She dropped into an old-fashioned office chair by the postmaster's side.

"Mr. Pearl," she told him directly, "I'm in trouble and I need your help. Can I count on it?"

"Sure—certainly, Miss Joyce. Shoot!"

"You gave Small John Copper a letter to-day. I'm certain that it contains information regarding the gold that was stolen from me last trip in."

"Gold stole from you!" he cried.

"Yes, I said nothing to you about it. I thought it best to keep it dark. But I was held up by a gang of masked men on the trail into the cañon of the Paddlefish. Listen, now! I'll explain everything."

She told him, then, of Lin Columbia's plan to outwit the gang of highwaymen that he knew he would be obliged to deal with. She told of the hold-up, and of how she imagined she had successfully deceived the outlaws into making off with bags of scrap iron. She mentioned the letter that she had received that day from Henry McDade, and reviewed its distressing contents.

"Now," she asked, "will you tell me whether the letter that Small John received to-day was postmarked Spruce?"

"By golly, I don't know," he said. "I never look. I'm one country postmaster that don't fiddle with the mail of the patrons of his office."

"If Small John receives another letter, will you take note of the postmark and the return card on the envelope, if there is one? Will you do that and let me know?"

Pearl's gray whiskers jumped up and down with his agitation.

"Well, I don't know—I don't know 'bout that," he muttered disconcertedly. "It ain't right for a government official to do any sech thing, Miss Joyce. I wisht ye hadn't ast me. I like ye. I'd like to accommodate ye. But—"

"And you can't stretch a point in a serious matter like this one?"

"Well, I'd have to think her over, Miss—yes, sir, I'd have to think her over. Maybe you and me could think up a way to git around her. What's th' name of the party ye think Small John'll be gittin' letters from?"

"Ozias Tyrone, of Tyrone Ranch."

"Shucks, now! Sure? Him? I met him a couple o' times. Heard of 'im lots—and you, too, before ye come here. Well, now, say Small John Copper should get a letter from Ozias Tyrone. It wouldn't be right an' in accordance with th' strict performance of my duty as postmaster to say to ye: 'Small John got a letter from Ozias to-day.' But if ye was to come in and say: 'I'd like my mail, please, Mr. Pearl,' and I was to hand it to ye an' say: 'Guess that there's all, Miss Joyce,' how could I help ye from believin' that Small John had got a letter from Ozias, postmarked Spruce, Californy? And if I jest said: 'No more, Miss Joyce,' instead of 'Guess that's all, Miss Joyce,' how could I prevent ye from supposin' Small John *didn't* get a letter from Ozias, postmarked Spruce?"

"Thanks, Mr. Pearl," said Joyce, with a smile.

He looked at her wisely, and the ghost of a grin fluttered across his withered lips. Joyce sat silent for a minute, then leaned toward him.

"I want you to help me to-night, too," she said.

"Give us th' other barrel," Pearl invited.

"I must read that letter that Small John got to-day," she told him. "He has it now in the left-hand pocket of his sweater. Sometime to-night, some of my mules must get into trouble. Get to fighting, or one of them get his foot over a fence wire. You must be passing at the time. Suppose you were to drive off in your buggy somewhere as soon as we're through talking, and not return until Small John and Carey have gone to bed. You'll probably notice that the mules are in some difficulty, and will hurry to the sleeping tent and

arouse Small John and Art Carey. They'll hurry out to get the mules out of their trouble. Small John will scarce pause to put on his sweater. And while they're attending to the mules the letter will disappear."

Pearl nodded slowly, his eyes fixed on the darkening mountains to the northeast.

"I have an electric torch," Joyce continued. "I could read the letter behind the tent and return it to the sweater pocket within a minute. Will you help me?"

Ralph Pearl rose from his chair. "Don't want to hurry ye, Miss Joyce," he said, "but I got an engagement up the highway a mile or so, and I better be hitchin' up and drivin' off. I hope yer mules don't get to scrappin' or anything about half-past ten to-night."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE DOG HOUSE

AFTER arranging with Ralph Pearl to help her in her attempt to read the letter that Small John Copper had received, Joyce Larue had time to think over the catastrophe that had befallen her. She ate very little dinner that night, and was uncommunicative, despite her attempts at appearing natural. She left Small John and Art Carey at the table and hurried upstairs to her room in the hotel. Here she sat down, with the cheap lace curtains hiding her, and looked through them in the direction of the store and post office.

Never before in her life had she dreaded an ordeal such as she would be obliged to suffer when she reported to Linneus Columbia that she had failed in transporting his thirty thousand dollars' worth of gold amalgam to Porcupine. She held herself personally responsible for the safe delivery of the gold, of course.

Not for a moment did she try to console herself with the thought that what had transpired was unavoidable—that she herself had not bungled in any manner. All that she took into consideration was the fact that the treasure had been given into her keeping for delivery at Porcupine, and that she had not made good.

The loss of thirty thousand dollars, she realized, too, would cripple the mining partners grievously. It was a small fortune—more than most people are privi-

leged to handle in half a lifetime. How came it that she had failed? What was the answer to this mysterious puzzle? But, above all, what would Lin Columbia say to her? How would he look at her? What a fool she had been to take upon herself such an important task as carrying gold from the Pipe-organ to Porcupine, well knowing that Ozias Tyrone coveted this gold and would stop at nothing to gain possession of it!

She had failed miserably in convincing Lin Columbia that she was necessary to his prosperity and happiness. Agnes Deville, working over her stupid books and pecking away at a typewriter, was accomplishing more—was proving herself to be the woman that Lin needed as his life companion. She—Joyce—was nothing but a—a plain, ordinary dub.

No pleasanter thoughts entered her mind while she sat there brooding. Time dragged with her, but it was passing faster than she knew. It had been dark some time. She lighted a match to consult her wrist-watch, and to her stupefaction found out that it was after ten o'clock.

She rose hastily, lighted her coal-oil lamp and turned the wick down low. She slipped on her woolen sweater, because now, for the first time, she realized that the mountain night was cold. She found her electric torch. Then she stepped softly to the door, opened it—listened down the uncarpeted hallway.

The snoring of the occupants of the other rooms came to her. No one but herself seemed to be astir. She closed her door noiselessly and stole down the creaking stairway. Through the dark office she groped to the front door, which she unlocked. She started across the veranda, then returned, removed the key from the inside of the door, and pocketed it. She would take no risk of being locked out while on her adventure of the night.

The stars were bright, the night cold. Powdered light from the worlds above her showed her the way to the pasture. Soon, as she walked softly along through the grass, she heard the mules moving about, heard grunts of satisfaction as some of them thumped down to sleep, the thudding of hoofs as others strayed here and there.

The sleeping tent of her two packers was dark as she neared it. She described a wide semi-circle about it and took up her position in the rear, a hundred feet away. She lowered herself to a seat in the lush grass and waited, filled with the same morose thoughts that had claimed her mind at the window of her room.

Frogs croaked dismally as they sat in the chilling overflow of a near-by spring. From a distant hill came the weird, unearthly chattering of two coyotes, drunken with the spirit of mischievousness toward mankind. The night wind sobbed disconsolately in the branches of the oaks that spread themselves over Ralph Pearl's store.

Then suddenly came new sounds. They were the far-off rattling of a buggy whose nuts needed tightening and whose axles cried out for grease—the *thumpety-thump-thump* of a horse's hoofs. Ralph Pearl's old sorrel mare, born to the saddle and working under one until the age of twelve, chose to gallop instead of trotting when she took up her unexpected future between the shafts. Her gait was unmistakable as she rambled on toward home and hay with the erratic recklessness of cow-pony days behind her.

Joyce rose from the ground, drew nearer to the tent, lay flat again, keeping her head as much below the grass as possible.

The galloping ceased as suddenly as if the old mare had been reined to her haunches by a rider on her back. Silence followed, except that now and then Pearl's

axles uttered feeble protests. Then Joyce heard the soft thudding of the mare's feet as she progressed toward the store at a walk.

She knew when Ralph Pearl halted her. Silence once more. Several minutes passed. Then she heard Pearl swiftly approaching the tent of Carey and Small John Copper.

He reached it, lifted his voice.

"Hey, in there, you fellas!" she heard him call. "They's a mule got his pastern hung on th' bob wire, and th' others are pesterin' 'im. Better get out and git 'im off, or he won't start to-morrow for th' Pipe-organ. Both o' ye better come. He's rarin' with mad. One o' ye oughta hold 'im while to'othern's gittin' 'im off."

There was a sleepy response from within. Small John Copper then bawled out:

"What's that? What did ye say?"

Pearl repeated his information.

"Don't hear anythin'," answered Carey.

"I shoood 'em away from 'im," said Pearl. "They was cuttin' up scand'lous. They'll be back after 'im ag'in."

"Aw right," answered Small John sleepily; and within three moments both packers were following Pearl in the direction of his buggy.

Then Joyce scrambled to her feet and ran to the rear of the tent. She pulled a stake in her hurry, wriggled under the canvas wall. Protecting the stream of light from her electric torch with a hand, she let her eyes dart about the tent, anxious to locate Small John's sweater while the backs of the men were toward her as they walked away. For surely her light, dim though she kept it, would show through the canvas.

She sucked in her breath in sudden excitement. Small John's sweater lay on the ground, close to the head of one of the bunks. She pounced upon it, bent down.

Her slim brown hand entered the left-hand pocket. Paper crackled in her fingers. A wave of triumph swept over her as, with the letter clutched tightly, she leaped to the rear wall and crawled out again.

There in the tall grass she lay and trained the shaft of brilliancy from her torch on the piece of paper that her trembling fingers had jerked from the dirty envelope. Swiftly her eyes followed the uncertain lines of uncouth chirography. She read:

SMALL JOHN COPPER:

Dear Sir—When we got about fifteen mile from the place where we held up the girl and you and the other fellow we opined the bags that we had got and they was filed with balls of clay and old iron wrapped in paper and stuff like that, which is heavy but worth nothing much. But you know that Small John as well as we do. You fooled us thats what you did and we are after you hot and heavy. I'll give you one chance to get the gold amalgum that you hid out on us and pretended you had made a mistake, and slip it to me or I'll fix you. The boys are mighty sore and me too. You can't come that on us, Mr. Small John Copper. And don't think you ain't watched rite now. When you wrote me that you had listened behind Columbia's tent and heard him tell Joyce about trying to fool us with iron we thought you was playing square. But you thought you'd hog it all on us, didn't you? Well you won't. Write me a letter as soon as you get this and tell us where you hid the gold so we can get it or your life aint worth a sent. Youre watched rite now Small john. Be careful.

Respectfully,

OZIAS TYRONE.

Joyce Larue gasped with astonishment, and hastily thrust the letter back into its container.

While she fumbled for and found the sweater she heard men's voices. She dared not flash her light. Just in time, for the voices were now right before the tent, her fingers came in contact with the woolen gar-

ment. She thrust the letter back into the pocket, dived for the rear wall, and crawled under just as the two packers, growling at each other, entered between the flaps.

"Infernal fool!" she heard Carey say. "He's goin' into second childhood, that old ostrich! If that mule had his pastern hung up in the barbed wire he didn't get a scratch, and he was off before Pearl got here. That bird's gettin' nutty!"

"Umph!" grunted Small John, which expression of disgust spoke volumes.

Joyce heard both men throw themselves upon their bunks as she cautiously slipped away in the direction of the hotel, not daring to replace the tent stake that she had pulled on entering. Her packers would think nothing of its removal. A gust of wind during the night, which had not awakened them, might have caused the canvas to jerk the stake from the ground. This would be their acceptance of the matter, she reasoned, provided they gave it any consideration at all.

Trees cast strange shadows as she slipped along toward Pearl's hotel. The stars were brighter, the shadows deeper. The wind moved softly westward. Limbs swayed; the shadows moved.

She stopped in her tracks suddenly. Surely the upright shadow that she had seen was moving differently from those cast by the scattering oaks and pines of the flat. It looked like the shadow of a man.

The movement ceased entirely. Yet the wind continued to sway the branches. Then a quicker movement came—the shadow that had disturbed her vanished.

"It's a man," she whispered. "He stepped behind that pine tree. He's watching Small John Copper."

She hastened on, seeking the shadows where possible. She regretted that the man had seen her, whoever

he might be. She looked back several times before she reached the hotel, but saw nothing to perturb her.

She stepped softly to the hotel veranda, and crossed it on tiptoes. She turned the doorknob, tried to open the door. The knob turned readily; the mechanism worked. Yet the door would not open. A trifle worried, she glanced back—all around. She saw no movement, no shadow that looked suspicious.

She whipped out her electric torch and trained it on the door crack. She turned the knob again and watched. The bolt had not been shot into its socket. Yet the door would not open. She had the key in one hand. The only answer was that somebody had entered the hotel while she was away, or come down the stairs, and, failing to find the key, had placed the back of a chair under the knob to keep intruders out.

Ralph Pearl, of course, when he had entered after stabling his sorrel mare! How utterly thoughtless of him! He was old, perhaps a little childish, as Carey had maintained, and she herself knew from experience that he was distressingly forgetful.

Well, she would try the windows of the ground floor. If they resisted her, it would begin to look as if she must dodge the mysterious watcher that she had seen until morning came.

The windows on the veranda, she found, were securely fastened. She gave them up and slipped around to one side of the house. Here the windows were too high for her to reach, and she came in contact with nothing that she might climb upon.

She went to the other side. The windows here were lower, but latched.

Now she passed to the rear, where she tried the windows of the kitchen with no better luck. But close to the kitchen door there stood a screened cooler, in which meat and vegetables were kept during the cool months

of spring. Close by was a small dog house, abandoned, serving no earthly purpose but to clutter up the hotel yard.

Joyce trained her spotlight aloft, regardless of consequences. She saw that a second-story window, which she knew opened into the upstairs hall, was open.

If she could manage to get the dog house on top of the screened cooler, she thought that she could grasp the sill of this open window above her head. She was athletic. To spring from the roof of the dog house and draw herself up by the arms would be an easy task, once she had clutched the sill.

She pressed the lever and extinguished her light. When her eyes were once more accustomed to the starlight, she began trundling the dog house, as noiselessly as possible, toward the cooler. With no small effort she hoisted it to the cooler top. She stepped to the top tread of the kitchen stairs, crawled up on the cooler, stood erect, climbed to the roof of the dog house on her knees.

Carefully, because the dog house was wobbly, she raised herself to a semi-erect position. Teetering precariously, hands ready to be thrown out and break a fall, she reached up toward the window sill.

Cautiously she straightened upward until she was standing at her full height. She grasped the window sill above her head, and found that she was just able to lay her fingers over the sloping plane. She would be obliged to jump and reach farther in before she could command a decent hold. Then, by scrambling with her toes against the side of the building, could she draw herself up, when deprived of the chance to spring from the dog house roof?

She crouched, leaped upward, caught the ledge inside in a firm grip. She struggled, boot toes trying to dig their way into the clapboards of the building.

For fully half a minute she labored frantically, then gave it up. She had not the strength in her arms to lift her body without the impetus that a leap from the dog-house roof would give her. She must give up before her strength was gone, take a desperate chance of dropping back to the dog house without crashing on down to the ground, and find some other plan for entering the closed hotel.

She looked down to calculate the distance.

The dog house and the cooler that had supported it were no longer under her. Instead, a man stood there—a tall man—looking up at her in the fickle light of the stars.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHAT THE LIGHT REVEALED

"WELL," came the voice of the man who stood below Joyce Larue, "how d'ye like the human-fly stuff now? Kinda between th' devil an' th' deep blue sea, ain't ye? Ye can't climb up without the dog house to jump from, it seems. And ye can't hold to that window ledge forever. Consequently ye gotta jest naturally drop into th' arms of the devil. That's me!"

"Won't you please go away?" panted the girl. "What do you want with me? I'm not bothering you, am I?"

"Maybe ye're a second-story worker, I don't know. And maybe I'm a detective. Is that th' way ye go into a hotel ordinarily?"

"No, of course not. Don't be stupid. Every door and window of the hotel is locked. I'm stopping here. Won't you please let me alone, whoever you are?"

"I'm not touchin' ye," came with a chuckle. "Ain't I got as much right to stand here as you have to hang from that window ledge?"

"But you removed my—my support from under me."

"Did I?"—with an exasperating drawl.

The girl lost her temper.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Man," she threw down cuttingly at him, "I've held on to this ledge about as long as I can. I'm going to drop very soon. And when I drop I'll drop shooting. You'd better believe me."

"Yer gun's in yer holster, ain't she? Ye're holdin' on with both hands, little one. How ye gonta come down shootin', then? Tell me that."

"I'll show you in about two seconds," she retorted.

"Ye'll drop right into my arms, kid. I'm gonta ketch ye—see? And I'll have my arms about ye before ye c'n get yer gun. Don't ye think ye'd better listen to what I got to say?"

"Say it quickly," snapped Joyce. "For, as I said, when I come I'll come shooting. And I'm coming mighty soon."

"If ye c'n hang on a little longer I'll shove th' cooler back under ye. Ye c'n drop on that all right. But ye gotta tell me somethin' first."

"What do you want to know? Who are you?"

"Call me 'Hickey' for short," he chuckled. "Now tell me what ye did with th' thirty thousand dollars' worth of gold amalgam that ye packed out o' th' Pipe-organ country last trip in before this one."

"I did nothing with it," claimed the girl, setting her teeth after the words and clinging to the window ledge with the last atom of strength in her aching arms. "It was stolen from me. I guess you know about that."

"Sorry to say I don't, Miss. But I do know that Tyrone didn't get her. I know it wasn't stolen from ye, if ye want th' truth."

"Then, since you know so much, you ought to savvy that I shipped it to San Francisco, as I was instructed to do."

"Funny part of it is ye didn't," he drawled back at her. "So who got it? Where'd ye cache it, miss?"

Here was a complication. She had been informed by letter that day that the bags which Pearl had shipped to San Francisco contained scrap iron. The letter that Small John Copper had received from Tyrone convinced her that the rancher's gang had like-

wise made off with bags of iron. Small John had been accused by his black-bearded boss of stealing the gold himself. Now this man verified both statements and accused *her* of hiding the amalgam somewhere.

But how did he know, and who was he, anyway?

Her arms ached terribly; her head was swimming. She must drop any instant now. She had threatened to draw her gun as she dropped. But would she have the use of her arms, after the torturing strain to which they had been subjected? Again, she felt, she was due to fail.

She wondered if she could hold herself with her left hand while she rested her right a little before dropping. She was angry—desperately in earnest when she had threatened the insolent man below her. Gradually she eased her right hand away from the ledge. But in that instant she realized that her left arm had stood too much. She slipped, grasped rapidly up at the ledge with her right hand again, lost her hold entirely.

There came the flutter of a riding skirt, a little muffled scream from the girl's lips. As she dropped straight downward she tried with all of her will power to make her benumbed right arm do her bidding. But she dropped into the waiting long arms below her with her hand on the butt of her revolver, helpless to draw the weapon out.

The man's body broke her fall. She slipped through his arms, unharmed, to the ground. Women, it has been said, are more primitive than men. At any rate, when cornered, they remember much sooner that their precursors defended themselves with their teeth. There came an agonized howl of pain and rage from the long-legged man who held the girl in his arms. He threw up one hand, jerked the other from the sharp, white teeth that had imbedded themselves in it to the

bone. He staggered away from her. Then blue steel flashed in the starlight and the girl had him covered.

"Up with 'em!" she cried shakily. "Be quick!"

Her arm was trembling, her fingers deadened. Perhaps he knew this, but it was no time to take chances. Both of his hands shot toward the heavens. It was apparent that he knew, or had heard of Joyce Larue, and maybe had listened to the story of Ozias Tyrone's wounded leg. He climbed the ladder, at any rate, and there he stood, virtually her prisoner.

A quick step and Joyce had disarmed him. She paced backward a couple of strides, two guns now trained on his middle.

"You're a miserable mistake," she said witheringly. "You ought to have known that, directly after I dropped, my gun hand would be numb and useless. But you were too much of a coward to take a chance. Now I've got your gun, and my hands are steady again. And so you're going to tell me what *you* know about that gold amalgam."

"I—I—"

"Don't stammer! Tell me first who you are. Then I'll know better what to do with you."

"I—my name's Hickson. I don't belong about here."

"Then what are you doing here, Mr. Hickson?"

"Well, you know, I guess. I got nothin' to say. You wouldn't shoot me, anyway. Now what ye gonta do about it? Ye got th' drop on me—le's see how ye're gonta handle this thing."

"Oh! Your courage is returning, after the first shock, is it? Well, listen here, Hickson, I *will* shoot you. You're going to tell me what you have up your sleeve and how you come to be concerned in my gold shipment, or I'm going to let you know how a hole in your body feels after a thirty-eight bullet has passed through it.

"Don't make any mistake about me, Hickson. I won't kill you, but I'll let you have it if you don't come across. I don't think you like the thought of a bullet wound very well. It hurts, Hickson, they tell me. Blood will flow from it. Maybe the bullet will break a bone. You'll be sick, feverish, laid up for a long time afterward, and perhaps blood poisoning will set in. But you're going to talk right now, and tell me everything you know, or you're going to get a bullet under your hide."

She heard him panting like a tired dog, and knew that her words had put the fear of excruciating pain in his heart. Many men, brave enough and reckless enough under the spur of excitement and battle, will not flinch when a gun muzzle is belching smoke and lead at them. But let them deliberately contemplate being wounded, and make them stand up, unarmed, to face a weapon that threatens them, and their last atom of fortitude will seep out through their fingertips and their very blood will run cold with fear. The rapidity with which this man had elevated his hands when she got the drop on him had convinced Joyce Larue that he was of the type described.

Cautiously in the darkness, unbeknown to him, she tucked the six-shooter that she had taken from him inside her belt. Her left hand removed the electric torch from a side pocket of her sweater. There came a tiny metallic click, and a disk of white radiance trembled on his face, revealing every taut line of it, its pallor, its hideous expression of cowardice.

The ghostly whiteness of that face, the thin, wispy, hay-colored hair, the red, watery under eyelids that sagged down like those of a bloodhound, were a familiar sight to Joyce Larue.

"Noah Littlejohn!" she cried in amazement.

CHAPTER XXX

ACT ONE

THE girl did not lose her presence of mind when the electric torch revealed the peeled-looking face of Noah Littlejohn.

"So it's you, is it?" she continued witheringly. "Well, Noah, I didn't know you were such an utter coward, nor that you could disguise your voice so well. You fooled me completely, despite your height. Well, let's get down to business now. What's the answer to my questions?"

Noah Littlejohn licked dry lips with a tongue equally dry. It was apparent that he had not forgotten the scene in the corral at Tyrone Ranch, when this girl had shot Black Ozias in the leg for refusing to stop tormenting Small John Copper.

Joyce realized this, and made the most of it.

"You know me, Noah," she said significantly. "You know that I mean just what I say when I threaten to shoot. So let's know the worst at once. Come—get it off your chest, man!"

"What did ye ask, Miss Joyce?" he questioned meekly.

"First, what are you doing here?"

"Er—now—watchin' Small John Copper."

"I inferred as much. What do you expect him to do?"

"We think—that is somebody thinks—that he—he got the gold and hid it."

"Ozias Tyrone and the rest of his gang think so. I understand. You think that, supposed to be working

as your spy by traveling with my outfit, he double-crossed you, eh?"

"Well—yes—I guess so, Miss Joyce."

"In other words, he listened when Mr. Columbia and I were talking over that shipment. He discovered that we suspected Ozias and the rest of you fellows of having designs on our shipment. He learned, too, that we were going to try to fool you by letting him see us place bags containing scrap iron on my foremost mules, while the gold was to be packed by the tail-enders. Small John was to slip the bags of gold away from me while I slept at night and place them in the packs of the leaders, where your gang could get them. He was to leave in their place by my side the bags of scrap iron, which, next morning, I would sneak into the rear packs, thinking that I still had the gold and was putting something over on Ozias and the rest.

"But now, as I understand it, Small John Copper has failed to run true to form. We'll say that he got hold of more bags of scrap iron for himself, and, after he had taken the gold from me, put the iron in the gold bags, which he placed in the packs of the leaders. That night he hid the gold, expecting later to return and get it and beat it out of the country.

"This he has scarcely had an opportunity to do as yet. And in the meantime he expected you and Ozias and the boys to believe that, in some way, the plan had miscarried—that Lin Columbia had fooled even him regarding the disposition of the gold in the pack—that the gold had gone on to San Francisco on schedule. That was to be his alibi.

"But it seems, now, that it wasn't a good one. To-day I received word from San Francisco that the bags shipped contained only iron. You, it seems, know about that, too. And right soon you're going to tell me how you know it. Small John hadn't counted upon

this. But to-day he, too, received a letter—a threatening letter from Tyrone. It accused him of double-crossing the gang, and threatened his life provided he didn't produce the stuff. It warned him that he was watched constantly, and you are here for that purpose. That letter put fear into his heart.

"Now, tell me, Noah, how you know that the gold did not go to San Francisco?"

Noah Littlejohn stammered, licked his lips again, and at last made the confession:

"We got a helper in th' express car o' th' local train. He—he's in on th' deal, sort of. It was him that let us get away with a holdup that we pulled off last year. Might as well 'fess up, I guess. From what ye told Ozias that time ye leaded 'im up, I guess ye know all about us, anyway.

"So now this here express fella was to go through th' bags an' see whether Columbia had put anythin' over on us. If he had, we was gonta—now—well, jest try to get it back agin. So he looked into that there shipment, and wrote Ozias that they wasn't anythin' but iron in them bags. Black Ozias and me happened to be at Spruce when th' letter come in, so we got her right away. Then Ozias he wrote Small John that we was onto 'im. I come up here to watch 'im."

"I see—I see. Quite clear, Noah. Then why did you disturb me by following me through the darkness to the hotel and dragging my support from under me?"

"Well, I—I—"

"Go on! Remember my threat!"

"I don't know jest why I done it, Miss Joyce. I knew you was pretty clever. I got to thinkin' that maybe Small John had played square, after all, and that you'd put somethin' over on us yourself. I thinks I'll snoop around and see what ye're up to when ye go

to Small John and th' other fella's tent. Then I folly ye to th' hotel, and watch ye tryin' to git in. And when I seen ye climb up and jump fer th' window sill, I thinks ye can't make her unless ye got somethin' to jump from. So I sneaked up and took th' cooler and th' dog house away."

"Well, just why, please?"

"I thought that, with you hangin' there and maybe scared o' me, ye'd let me know whether it was you that fooled us or not. I changed my voice as much as I could, and thought that, rather than drop down into th' arms of a strange man that was threatenin' ye, ye'd tell me what I wanted to know. But—but she didn't work out jest right."

She held the disk of light untremblingly on his ghostly face. He blinked his blood-shot eyes and looked anywhere but directly at her. This man, now holding his hands above his head and seemingly in her power, was as inscrutable, as menacing, as ever. Despite the fact that she had the upper hand she shuddered at the sight of him.

Deep down in her heart she feared this man as she had never feared anybody else in her life. She knew him to be shrewd, clever, cruel, uncannily fascinating, utterly unscrupulous. Even now she half believed that he was playing with her as an angler plays a trout that has swallowed the hook. But she did not know how nor why, and realized that she was altogether without a weapon with which to combat him.

"And what," she asked at last, "is your final decision in the matter, Noah?"

"Oh, Small John got th' stuff, I guess," he told her, "I can't see no other way out of it now. And I bet I know what ye was doin' at Small John and th' other fella's tent to-night. Ye played a trick on 'im, you and somebody that drove up jest then. And ye got

them fellas out o' their tent while ye sneaked that letter and read it. That's what makes me think that Small John hid th' stuff instead of you. If yer amalgam had reached Frisco safe ye wouldn't 'a' cared what was in that letter, Miss Joyce. But ye kep' yer head down in th' grass an' I couldn't see jest what ye was doin' when ye was readin' it."

"What has caused you to think that I read that letter to-night?" she demanded.

"Well, I saw Small John git her through my glasses. I was hid up in the trees an' chaparral on th' hillside back there. I saw him come outa th' store with her and take her to his tent. And—and I knew ye hadn't read her then. So I thought maybe that was what ye was up to to-night."

"What right had I to read Small John's letter? I admit now that I did. But you seem to think that I might have read it before—at the store, we'll say."

"Well, it was sent to Small John Copper, in care of Miss Joyce Larue. I tried to git Ozias not to write that on th' envelope, but he did. I told 'im that, if Pearl handed it to you, ye'd have a perfect right to open her, since it was sent in yer care. And I expected ye to do that, seein' that, if ye read it, ye might find out somethin' about th' stolen gold. I warned Ozias, but he would send her that way, for fear Small John, not bein' well known about here, and receivin' no mail to speak of, mightn't git it."

"Noah, that's ridiculous! You're lying to me. It strikes me that you wanted that letter to fall into my hands."

"Why, what an idee, Miss Joyce!"

"A strange one, I'll admit. But we're getting nowhere. Even if I make you talk by holding a gun on you, I can't make you tell the truth. You're too clever at lying, Noah. So I'm just going ahead with you,

meaning to shoot you if you refuse to answer my questions, and try to get your drift in spite of your lies. And so, summing it all up, Noah, what are you going to do now?"

Noah Littlejohn grinned at her. It was a fiendish grin, and the girl realized that, all the time she had been talking with him, he had been twisting her around his finger, so to speak, and that he was playing some shrewd, deep game.

"Why, jest keep watch on Small John Copper until he leads me to that hidden gold," he said. "Then maybe I'll kill 'im—I don't know."

"And don't you think that I want a hand in the recovery of that gold, Noah?"

"I reckon ye do," Noah replied. "So let th' best brains win."

"Here's your gun," Joyce said suddenly. "You're not afraid of me, and I am well aware of it. Please put the cooler back under the window for me. Then the dog house on top of that. And you climb up and help me to the hall above. You see, I'm not afraid of you, either. Come on, Noah—this act is over. There'll be an intermission before the curtain rises on Act Two. But look out then. That may be the act in which the woman gets the better of the villain in the plot. If not, Noah, there are other acts to follow before the final curtain falls."

"Got ye guessin' now, though, ain't I, Joyce?"

"I admit that you have," she told him.

He stepped closer to her. "They won't be no puzzles between you and me ever," he whispered, "if ye'll marry me, Joyce."

"I wouldn't consider it for a moment, Noah," she replied with brutal frankness.

"Why not? I'm nothin' much to look at, I'll admit. But I love ye, Joyce. I've loved ye sence th' first day

I rode to Tyrone Ranch an' saw ye. I'll be good to ye. And I got a future. Why not? Ye might do worse."

"I don't love you," she replied simply. "I don't even like you."

"I c'n make ye."

"No—never."

"Listen," he continued in a hoarse undertone: "How'd ye like to help me spend that thirty thousan' ye tried to send on its way to Frisco?"

"I wouldn't consider that, either. But do you mean that it is in your possession, Noah?"

"I didn't say that, did I? But maybe it's gonta be. And maybe th' rest that Columbia sends out o' th' Pipe-organ Country is gonta find its way into my hands."

"You seem to want to go to the pen, Noah," she warned him.

"Oh, no—ye can't send me there fer what I jest said. Ye wouldn't, if ye could, until ye've had a try at gettin' track o' that lost shipment. But ye'll never beat Noah Littlejohn. He's clever—ye got to hand it to 'im. He's playin' a rarin' game. Th' stakes is you. And Noah Littlejohn is gonta win! Better think over what I told ye, Joyce."

"I will," she promised, meaning something entirely different from the idea that her speech conveyed.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE STOLEN KISS

WITHOUT molesting her in the slightest, Noah Littlejohn had moved the cooler and the dog house under the hall window, climbed upon them ahead of Joyce Larue, helped her up, and boosted her to the window ledge above.

"Good night," he said meekly as he clambered down.

Then he had taken the dog house to its accustomed place in the yard and vanished into the velvety night.

Now the girl sat in her little room, with the lampwick still turned down low. She did not want to go to bed. Her mind was filled with her problem.

It seemed quite evident that Ozias Tyrone and his gang had made away into the mountains with bags containing worthless balls of clay and scrap iron. It was equally apparent that the bags which Pearl had shipped to San Francisco contained the same valueless material. What was the answer to this puzzling riddle?

Had she been right in her surmise that Noah Littlejohn had wished Ozias Tyrone's letter to fall into her hands, as if by accident? He was clever, it was true, but in a way his work seemed rather coarse. It seemed a little bit crude for him to tell Joyce that Small John Copper's letter had been sent in care of her, if Noah and Black Ozias really wanted her to get it. The plan was practicable enough, but why had the foreman of Tyrone Ranch laid it before her? She felt that he had

made a grave mistake in telling her that. Probably he had under-rated her powers of perception.

Now, what had become of the thirty thousand dollars' worth of gold amalgam? That was, above everything else, the important question. It struck her suddenly that Noah's story of the express messenger on the train was a trifle forced. What need had the gang of his service, if they expected Small John Copper to deliver the gold into their hands? It was true that this man might have been a member of Tyrone's gang for several years. Noah had said that he had acted a part in one of the holdups that the gang had perpetrated.

The bags that she had shipped, she recalled, had not been sealed in any way. There were heavy draw-strings on them, which had been pulled up tight and knotted several times. It would have been an easy matter for the express messenger to examine their contents. Yes, after all, if he actually was in league with the Tyrone Ranch gang, it would be the expected thing for him to do to look into the bags. That story seemed plausible now.

She revolved the problem this way and that in her keen mind. The question that always confronted her was, "Did Small John Copper really double-cross the gang and hide the gold somewhere along the trail?" It seemed that the only answer was yes, for he certainly had revealed intense fear when he read the letter from Ozias.

There was one other angle to the situation: Ralph Pearl, the postmaster, in whose keeping the gold had been placed for shipment, might have appropriated it and substituted iron scraps himself. But how could he know, unless he was in league with Small John Copper, that iron scraps figured in the shipments at all? It would have been a coincidence, pure and simple,

for him to fill the bags with the same heavy material that Lin was using in his effort to deceive the highwaymen. Pearl might have chosen, for instance, some weighty ore, or chunks of lead—many things besides scraps of iron.

No, she could not think Ralph Pearl guilty. Knowing nothing about the expected holdup at the time the bags were delivered into his hands, he scarcely would dare to take the risk of stealing the gold, knowing that suspicion must surely fall upon him. Besides, she was convinced of the little postmaster's integrity. She eliminated him from the plot immediately.

There remained only one answer to her problem, so far as she could see: Small John Copper, in an attempt to double-cross Ozias and his gang, had made the substitution and hidden the gold somewhere along the trail, expecting to get it and flee the country at the first opportunity. So what could the girl do now?

First, she must not let Small John know that he was under suspicion. Yet, at the same time, he must not be given an opportunity to recover the gold from its secret cache. No, that would not do, either! On the other hand, he must be given just such a chance; but some one whom she could trust must be following him, ready to pounce upon him and recover the treasure after he had led the way to it.

And whom could she trust? Where was such a man? He must be capable, courageous, stealthy, clever. For he would be obliged to deal with Noah Littlejohn as well as with Small John Copper. She believed, now, that Noah meant to trail along after her outfit when it started back to the Pipe-organ next morning. He would make a supreme effort to keep them constantly under his watchful eye. Joyce would see to it that Small John did not leave the outfit and get his loot during the trip back. She meant to watch him day

and night. So she had little to fear from Noah Littlejohn.

But after she had had a talk with Lin Columbia, and they had decided who was to shadow the outfit and keep tabs on the twisted little cow-puncher, Noah Littlejohn would have to be taken into consideration. She believed that Noah would follow her until Small John finally made the break. Small John might be crafty enough to let the stolen gold lie untouched all summer. Difficulties loomed more and more portentous as she continued to revolve the situation in her mind.

She forced herself to go to bed finally, about half past one. There would be two sleepless nights ahead of her if she kept the little *vaquero* under strict surveillance until the outfit reached the Pipe-organ again. Perhaps an hour later she dropped into deep slumber, from which she was awakened at an early hour by the woman who managed Pearl's hotel.

The pack was ready, having been prepared the night before. Small John and Art Carey had already eaten their breakfast and were saddling up when Joyce hurried from the hotel. She had barely time to thank Ralph Pearl for his assistance of the night as she vaulted into her saddle and helped her packers haze the shave-tails into line.

They were away finally, a long string of heavily laden mules. Their bulky packs swayed from side to side so that the outfit gave the impression of a lengthy worm wriggling its boneless joints over the hills toward the distant country that lay beyond.

Was Noah Littlejohn in the saddle, or traveling on foot, flanking the pack outfit, following it, working ahead of it, and climbing to some vantage point from which he could make certain that Small John Copper had nothing in mind but earning the wages that were paid him by Joyce Larue?

If he was keeping along with the outfit, he learned nothing on that trip to the Peddler's Gulch. Small John Copper, though he maintained a strange silence and showed a worried face, attended strictly to his duties and did not once betake himself from the trail. Joyce knew this, for she watched him twelve hours a day, and remained awake at night, her tent flaps parted a trifle so that she had the sleeping quarters of her two employees constantly in view. With her eyes red and swollen from loss of sleep, her young body weary and restless from the strain, she at last sighted the dirty canvases of the terminal camp through the greenery of the massive trees.

Then the outfit wove its slow way down to the river's level and came to a piteous, braying halt.

The time had come for the tormented girl to make report of her stewardship to Lin Columbia.

With her legs trembling from fatigue, half staggering, she left her mules and horse in the wranglers' care and walked at once to the office tent. There was no use to delay her grave disclosures. Joyce Larue was not one to hesitate from a disagreeable task. She could take her medicine.

As she neared the tent she heard the clicking of a typewriter. Agnes Deville was in there working. She did not hear the voices of Lin and Jeff in conversation, so she imagined that Agnes was alone.

"Hello!" she called, not very loudly, as she stood before the entrance. A second later she parted the flaps and stepped inside.

The clicking of the typewriter, perhaps, had prevented the occupants of the tent from hearing the word of greeting that she had meant to warn of her approach. At any rate, Lin Columbia was not aware of her presence, and neither was Agnes Deville.

The back of the amateur typist was toward Joyce.

Lin was standing close to her, slightly in rear of her, holding a piece of paper in his hand. But he was not engaged with it. His wide-apart blue eyes were fixed intently on Agnes's wealth of coal-black hair. He leaned down suddenly, touched the hair with his lips, and, without Agnes knowing that he had done so, stood erect and settled his glance on the paper in his hand.

Then intuition, perhaps, told him that somebody had entered behind him. He wheeled suddenly. His boyish face went red. His lips parted. He made a brave effort to control himself, failed miserably—stood there grinning in embarrassment, not quite sure whether Joyce had seen his impetuous act or not.

Her own glowing face ought to have convinced him that she had seen. But she, being a woman, controlled her emotion more easily. With a smile she stepped forward, the color sweeping from her cheeks as quickly as it had come.

"Hello!" she said. "Back again! Get ready for a blow in the short ribs, Lin. Do you want it in doses, or shall I hand it to you straight from the shoulder?"

Agnes had turned and sat gazing at her, a look almost of insolence on her face.

"Hello, Agnes," said Joyce. "How's everything?"

Agnes nodded, looked up at Lin, and made no oral reply.

"Sit down," offered Lin, jerking forward a chair. "You—I didn't know you'd filtered in. You surprised me, sister. What's this about doses and straight-from-the-shoulder stuff? You've got bad news for us? Well, shoot the piece! Both barrels at once, then club me over the head with the stock if I don't go down. Shall I close my eyes?"

"Lin," said the girl, "the thirty thousand dollars' worth of gold amalgam is gone. It never reached Frisco. It was taken away from me on the trail close

to the Paddlefish River. I—I guess I wasn't to blame. I don't know. I'm making every effort to—to get it back."

"Great Gesticulating Geronimo!" groaned Lin, dropping to the chair that he had passed out for Joyce. "Both barrels in the chest, the stock over my head—and the trigger flew down my throat and choked me. I'm dead, girls! Violets, please!"

CHAPTER XXXII

BETWEEN TWO FIRES

For some time after Lin Columbia's explosive exclamation there was silence in the office tent. Lin sat staring at the girl as if waiting for her to burst out laughing and tell him that she had been fooling him. Agnes Deville looked very uncomfortable, and her glance coasted from the bearer of news to Lin as if she were trying to read their minds. Joyce Larue stood straight upon her feet, looking at Lin, waiting for him to recover from his shock.

He straightened himself in his chair suddenly and clasped his hands in his lap.

"I feel better now," he stated simply. "But for a little there I had pollywogs in my pergola. Of course you're not merely offering to swap conversational trophies, Joyce. You weren't walking in your sleep when you came in here. You really said that, with both eyes open, didn't you?"

Joyce nodded.

Lin crossed his legs and nursed one of his calves. "Well," he said, "you told your story backward, *mes-tiza*. You slipped me the climax before you introduced your characters and outlined the plot. I'm afraid I'm not gonta be able to say much for your yarn after you've spilled it. But let her flow. Commence."

Agnes leaned her elbow on the typewriter and listened to every word as Joyce laid before Lin the painful details. It was a rather long story, but neither Lin

nor the city girl interrupted the teller while the tale was in progress.

"Sniffin' Simonedes!" moaned Lin as Joyce stopped speaking and looked steadily at him with her large hazel eyes. "So old Know-a-Little John hopped on the rostrum and spoke a piece, eh? *Mestiza*, there's a deep plot afoot. I can't hang that old warhorse on the proper peg. I see him, think about him, and feel a pucker of intelligence sitting down on my seat of thought. Then, bingo!—the plug pops from my brain pan and every gem leaks out. I can't make him. He's as uninformative about himself as the expression on the face of a peeled potato. What's that old side-winder fidgetin' after, anyway?"

"He's too deep for me," admitted Joyce.

"He's as deep as grandma's grave," growled Lin. "He looks at you, grins that goblin grin of his, and his peeled face says: 'What's wrong with this picture?' You know it's all wrong, but your brain refuses to ease the answer down to your tongue.

"Now, changing the subject, as it were: Three rousing cheers for little Small John Copper! That is, if he double-crossed the bunch and muzzled that thirty thousand dollars' worth for himself. Not that he's gonta frolic away with the wampum, mind you. We'll look out for that. If he got it, we'll get it back. So I repeat, with due solemnity: Three rousing cheers for John! I'm glad he found the nerve to tie into Black Ozias and Savvy-a-portion John. But he's signed his death warrant. *Mestiza*, they'll wreck him. They'll blast him, sure. They'll snatch out his wish-bone for him and break it to see who gets the longest piece."

Lin Columbia leaned forward, joused his head, and looked up at the girl from Tyrone Ranch in his owlish way.

"*Mestiza*," he said, "let this enter your intellect: We've got to put a trailer after your outfit to function as fairy godmother to little Small John. Where John goest, he will go. Where John lodgest, he will lodge. John's people will be his people. And when John bursts himself loose from that trail to see if little Moses is still in the bulrushes, this bird must gallop after him and hang about his neck the motto: 'Thou Shalt Not Pick The Yellow Asters In Thy Neighbor's Cemetery Lot.'"

"But, Lin, where can we find such a man?" asked Agnes, speaking for the first time since Joyce had entered the tent.

"I'm puckering my brow over it now," he told her. "There are a lot of low comedians suffering from laborer's cramp around this factory that might think they could make a hit at this. But none of them give me happy thoughts. We want some snake-eyed old disciple that isn't afraid to pick up a tadpole, and one who's also taken the time to herd a few thoughts into his head. In other words, I want a fightin' fool who's not a wanderin' tombstone. I want a live wire who's mixed a heap o' western savvy into the dish of chop suey he calls life. As the old maid said, 'I want a man.'"

He turned toward Agnes and looked up at her in the same comical manner in which he had been gazing at Joyce. "I wish I hadn't said all that," he lamented. "Now I've gone and got myself into an awful smear. I'm scheduled to be called an egotist for the remainder of my sojourn on this planet. Be it so. I've got to get straddle of that old horse of mine and seek success as a mountain detective myself. I'm the only man in camp who fulfills all of the requirements I outlined. I didn't realize I was putting a ring in my own nose when I hoisted that Help Wanted sign."

"Lin, you're not going to do it!" said Agnes quickly.

"Wrong answer," retorted Lin. "Next!"

"But, Lin, it's dangerous. You may get killed."

"That's what the drunken sheep herder said when he stuck his finger in the rattle-snake's mouth to find out if it was there or he was elsewhere."

Agnes's face worked. She glanced defiantly at Joyce, who, as deeply in love with Lin as she was, looked placidly back at her and showed no signs of perturbation over Lin's decision.

"You—you mustn't," she kept on weakly, appealing once more to the man.

Lin grinned at her. "Who can do it better, then?" he asked.

"I—I don't know. I'm not thinking about that at all. But you mustn't take the risk. You're too valuable. Let somebody of less consequence try it—any one. Not you, though."

Lin Columbia's blue eyes twinkled as his glance coursed from one girl to the other.

"How 'bout it, *mestiza*?" he asked, his eyes steady now on the girl with the brown hair and chestnut eyes.

"I know I'd feel safer if I knew you were attending to the matter yourself," said Joyce. "And I don't know anybody who could handle it better than you. If you can spare the time, I think it's the best plan we can discover."

Agnes Deville sprang to her feet, and her black eyes fairly glared at the mountain girl.

"You sit there complacently and advise him to risk his life!" she cried hotly. "Don't you realize that he is too good for such work as that? He's one of the partners in this mining venture. It's going to be a big thing. Lin will be a man of great consequence soon, one of the big men of the West. *He* can't afford to take this risk. Let him pay some menial for the task.

Lin is a gentleman, even if *you* don't realize it. You wouldn't of course—you're not capable of realizing it, raised in the backwoods as you were! You—you'd drag him down to your level, when he's just ready to put all such things behind him. He will not go—I won't let him!"

"Smotherin' mudpuppies!" muttered Lin. "Agnes, regulate your method of attack. Don't call me a gentleman right before Joyce. You're a woman, and I can't fight back!"

"Cease your nonsense!" she threw at him. "You're too big, too important in the scheme of things, to risk your life in such a way. It's utterly ridiculous!"

She glared defiance at Joyce again, her lips pressed together and white, waiting for the counter attack.

But the other girl only smiled at her. "I don't think, Agnes," she said, "that you understand Lin as well as I do. He's not your kind, and I told you that the first day we met. Is it dishonorable, I ask you, for a man to protect his interests to the best of his ability?"

Her hazel eyes glowed suddenly and she snapped the fingers of both hands. "If I were a man," she cried, "I wouldn't give that for a woman who hadn't backbone enough to see him take a chance and go out to meet his enemies like a man. And I wouldn't give that for a man who would let such a woman hold him back. I'm of the West, I am. I'm used to seeing men act like men. When they're imposed upon I want 'em to put up a man-size scrap. And, by golly, I'll go out and scrap with 'em if they need my help!"

"I suppose you would!" gritted Agnes. "You—you impossible—"

"Ladies, ladies!" interposed Lin appealingly. "Remember the solemn occasion—remember your fathers were clergymen—remember that I am present! While I don't wish to take sides in your friendly little con-

troversy, I feel bound to state that Joyce is right in the present instance. Now, wait a minute! Wait a *min-ut'*! I was going to add that, after you've read proof on her little pamphlet, you'll realize that she has pitched a leaner to the peg. I'm the ostrich to hairpin that old hay hound that I ride occasionally and fare forth to Don Quixote this windmill. That'll be next trip in. To-morrow we'll send no gold. But that rich pocket we struck yesterday is gonta yield fifty thousand dollars' worth. And next trip in I'm gonta play Mary's lamb to Joyce and guard those golden joybells like a daddy quail perched on a sagebush over his covey. We simply cannot afford to lose those thirty thousand apples of Hesperides! Pay day's close, and the till looks as hollow as the inside of a sheep herder's head. Hear that? The cook's ringing the dinner gong. Let's forget our little difference and go call his bluff."

Joyce rose promptly to her feet. But Agnes Deville sat down in her chair and hid her white face against her arms. Utterly unable to understand her display of abject misery, Joyce gazed in puzzlement into the blue eyes of Lin Columbia, then back at the shaking shoulders of the girl whose black hair Lin Columbia had stooped and kissed.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MONEY MATTERS

JEFFREY DEVILLE, who was now able to work, had come in from the grade with the laborers and teams while the conference in the office tent was taking place. Coming from the wooded corrals, he saw Joyce and Lin walking together toward the dining tent and joined them.

"Hello, Joyce!" he greeted the girl. "Back again, right side up, I see. Where's the sister?"

But before either Joyce or Lin had time to frame a reply Agnes came walking briskly toward them, her face a little pale but displaying no further signs of her recent emotion.

The quartette proceeded on toward dinner, Joyce with Jeffrey, Agnes by the side of Lin Columbia.

"Here's a flock of letters for you," Joyce told her companion. "I separated them from the bunch. The rest are in the office tent."

"Thank you," said Jeffrey, taking the letters from her hand. He begged her pardon, shuffled them, glanced briefly at the return notices on the envelopes. "M'm-m!" he muttered. "One from McDade. Wanted to get that one, all right. I hope it won't disappoint me."

"Yes, I noticed that one," said Joyce. "I received one from him, too. I'm sure mine was a bitter disappointment. But let Lin tell you about it. He knows now. I don't feel like repeating my pitiful story."

Jeffrey Deville's handsome dark eyes studied her slightly drawn face in a puzzled way; and it seemed that, for the first time since he had joined her, he read something there that was discomfiting.

"You don't seem very cheerful this evening," he said. "If Mack's letter affected you that way I'm almost afraid to open mine. But I feel that I must now. Will you pardon me if I dig into it right away?"

"Certainly," replied the girl; and he tore open the envelope and read the letter in question during the remainder of their walk to the dining tent, finishing it after they were seated.

Joyce watched his face for signs of discontent, discovered them. She had not the remotest idea of what the letter contained, but supposed, of course, that Henry McDade had mentioned the clay-wrapped scrap iron that he had received instead of gold.

Jeff sat gazing at his clean plate in an abstracted way after he had laid the letter down. Then he lifted his head suddenly and spoke to the girl on the bench beside him.

"So the story that you wanted Lin to tell me concerned the loss of our thirty thousand dollars' worth of amalgam, did it?"

"Yes," replied the girl in a low tone. "But please spare me a repetition of the distressing details. Let Lin tell you all about it."

"Of course," he readily complied. "It must have been a severe shock to you—the holdup and everything concerning it."

"The holdup hardly phased me," she told him. "But my failure to make good is worse than a nightmare."

"Don't worry—don't think about it," he said kindly.

Agnes was looking across the table at her brother. "Bad news, Jeff?" she asked. "Your face looks strained."

"Yes, pretty bad," he answered, too engrossed with his own troubles to notice that his sister's conversational advances were forced and that her cheeks were pallid.

The irrepressible Mr. Columbia was busy buttering bread for all hands, passing dishes of food right and left, and trying to banter anybody who would listen to him.

"It's from Mack," Jeffrey continued. "I'll tell all of you about it after dinner. It's not good for the digestion to discuss unpleasant matters at the table."

Lin Columbia, as buoyant as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred to depress him, kept the conversation going after this. Then finally they rose from the table and walked back to the office tent.

Lin lighted a coal-oil lamp. They all sat down.

"Now," he remarked, "let's swap household words. Shoot, Jeff, and aim low. How hard are we walloped, little cellmate?"

"Harder than you realize, perhaps," replied his partner.

"You mean the loss of the thirty thousand? Did McDade write to you about that?"

"Yes, he mentioned it, but didn't go into details. He wrote that he had written Joyce about it, and expected her to tell me more than he could. But that's not all."

"I'm sorry to hear that it isn't," said Lin. "Because that doesn't worry me much, somehow. The unavoidable delay in getting it back is all that slaps me on the wrist. Because I'm going to get it back, or make sure that nobody else enjoys it. Now give us your left, brother. What kind of a punch have you got in that?"

"Well, Henry McDade can't lend me a penny," replied Jeffrey. "Everything he's got is hopelessly tied

up in oil. He regrets, and all that, but simply can't join us now."

"Uh-huh—I'm not surprised."

"I am, Lin. I expected Mac to pungle up fifty thousand without winking an eyelid. You don't seem to realize how badly we are in need of it."

"Sure do. But I don't like to weep. Tears interfere with my usual expression of geniality. We're shipping fifty thousand by the *mestiza* next trip in after this one, or as soon as we can get the stuff into the form of hard amalgam. I'm gonta get back the thirty thousand we now have somewhere in the safe deposit vaults of the Mercantile Mountain Bank. That'll make eighty thousand. It'll pull us through—road, little stamp mill when the steel is laid—everything."

"Not by any means, Lin."

"That and what we're gonta wrest from the bosom of Mother Earth within the next six months will, my son. And you have always said, you know, that if things began to look too dark you could sell some bonds and things and borrow from your principal."

Jeffrey sighed, closed his eyes, and laid his head on the back of his chair.

"I'd do so willingly," he stated, "but Mack's letter informs me that I've just been cleaned out. I'm broke—busted—whipped to a standstill."

"Why, Jeffrey!" cried Agnes. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Mack writes that the newspapers he sent will explain it all. The investment company whose stocks I own has gone fluey. The stocks have dropped down to nothing on exchange."

"But your gilt-edged bonds, Jeffrey!" gasped his sister.

"Sold all of 'em and bought more stock in the in-

vestment company" Jeffrey stated in a weary voice. "When I went in with Lin, I realized that we'd need a lot of money to put this thing across. The road alone is going to stand us almost three times the amount we figured on. So I—I thought I'd take a chance and get eight and a half per cent instead of the safety first and six. And they've cleaned me."

"You don't mean, Jeffrey, that what Father left you is all gone! You don't mean that your entire principal is wiped out!"

"Nothing else," he replied, his head still tilted back and his eyes still closed.

"For the love of Michelangelo!" muttered Lin. "Pile it on! Pile it on, boys! And you've already pungled up every cent of the interest that this wad has earned for you, if I'm not mistaken."

"I'm telling all of you, once and for the last time, that I'm broke—I'm a pauper—I've been wiped off the financial map of this country!" Jeffrey rasped pettishly, opening his black eyes and glaring at his awed listeners as if ready to do battle with them.

None of them spoke. The grave silence that settled over them was finally broken by Jeffrey's sister. Of a sudden a strange, piteous sound came from her throat, and next instant her head was against her arm on the back of her chair, and she was sobbing heart-brokenly.

"Well, well, well!" exclaimed Lin, staring at the weeping girl in consternation. "I—this is—er—something fierce. Don't, Agnes! Gosh!"

Then, before either of the men knew what was occurring, the arm of the girl from Tyrone Ranch went about the waist of Agnes, and she was gently but forcibly lifted from her chair.

"Come! Come with me," said Joyce in a soothing tone. "I'm going to take you to your tent and put

you to bed. You've had too much for one day. There, there, now! Come on—I know what you need.”

To the complete mystification of Lin Columbia, at least, Agnes rose, still sobbing bitterly, and allowed herself to be led out.

Lin shook his head. “Can you beat that,” he muttered. “Can you pitch a ringer over it?”

Now the two men looked at each other in an embarrassed way. At last Jeffrey muttered:

“Over three hundred thousand dollars gone fluey in the snap of your finger, Lin! My God! Can you imagine it?”

“Never had the foundation for my imagination to work on,” replied Lin. “A nifty little blow, old pal. An uppercut right where she would jolt this hectic mining company as close to eternity as I ever want to see her. Well, let's not let our brains cuddle up for a nap on the doormat of the future. The big question is, ‘Where do we go from here?’”

Jeffrey shrugged his shoulders and flipped out his hands, palms showing.

“My brains are stuttering a little, too,” Lin said. “Course you're gonta be worth ten times as much as you were before you locked horns with me in this attempt to pluck buttercups from the bosom of Mother Earth. I'm sure sorry for you, though, *amigo*. But she's comin'—your fortune. Yours and mine, old hell-fringer.

“But the inevitable meantime knocks the sawdust out of my mummified dome. We've got to have cash—money—jack! The fifty thousand that we've got to get out of here and the thirty thousand that's buried somewhere in these speechless mountains is not enough. Payday's close for the miners and the clodnudgers as well. Feed costs like hell. Joyce must get hers as regularly as anybody else. By golly, you've got me

doing it now! I'm guessing, too. How're we gonta congregate this cash, Jeffrey? You're the financier. I'm the knock-'em-in-the-collar bird. Make medicine concerning money."

"There's only one thing that I can do," said Jeff slowly. "I'll have to call on Agnes for a loan. Her principal is safe. She can't touch it, according to dad's will. Dad hadn't much confidence in women's financial discretion, so he made it impossible for Agnes to go through her principal. But I know she's saved quite a bunch from her earnings of twenty thousand dollars a year.

"I've been putting what I didn't spend back into stocks. Agnes has been content to keep the earnings from her income invested at four per cent, the principal available at any time.

"She's spent a lot of money, of course. It costs like the mischief to keep up a suite with servants at the St. Ignatius, and she has stood half of the gaff. Her clothes and cars and horse and parties cost a pile. But she's had twenty thousand for six years now—Dad died six years ago last May—and she ought to have seventy-five thousand in the savings bank right now. But I've never bothered with her affairs, Lin, nor has she with mine. However, I think she has that much, at least. Only thing to do is put it up to her and see if she is willing to help us out."

"I hate it like a she burro hates a rattlesnake," said Lin thoughtfully.

"Here, too," Deville chimed in.

"How—how will she take it?"

"I think she'll come across and give us a lift. She's a good scout, Lin. You know that as well as I do. But, darn it, I hate like the devil to put it up to her. One thing is certain, though—she must be reimbursed at the very first opportunity. We'll have to

put off building the stamp mill—many things, I guess—in order to pay that debt first.”

“Of course,” Lin agreed. “Shall we put it up to her?”

“When she has recovered from the shock,” Jeff replied.

At that moment Agnes, followed by Joyce Larue, entered the tent. Her eyes still showed signs of weeping, and she was nervous and distraught. But she spoke up bravely.

“I heard you talking about me,” she said. “What is it, Jeffrey?”

She gazed at her brother with tragic dark eyes, holding her red underlip with her white teeth. It seemed to Lin Columbia, as he looked at her sympathetically, that she knew what was to be asked of her, and that she was steeling herself against some great ordeal.

Jeff spoke briefly, straight to the point, and asked her for the loan of enough money to pull them through.

She closed her eyes, as her brother had done when crushed by the news conveyed in McDade’s letter. She swayed slightly, but was caught by Joyce before either man could get upon his feet. She opened her eyes then, gulped, and brushed a white hand slowly across her forehead.

“I—I knew it was that,” she said weakly. “And I came to—to get it over with as soon as possible. I’m sorry, Jeffrey—sorry, Lin. But I can’t lend you any money; that is, I don’t think I can. I won’t know for several days. Not until I—I have written to San Francisco and received a reply. No, not to San Francisco! I didn’t mean that. But I must receive an answer to a letter before I can tell you positively. I’m sure, though, that you oughtn’t to let your hopes rise. I know that I shall have nothing to lend you. I—I’m sorry.”

She was looking straight at Lin Columbia as she finished speaking—looking at him with a pitiful pleading in her eyes. Her lips trembled; she broke down once more as Joyce led her a second time from the tent.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"THE DOPE"

JEFFREY DEVILLE thought, of course, that his sister's suffering had been caused by the news of his own misfortune, the loss of the thirty thousand dollars' worth of amalgam, and her inability to lend money to him and Lin. He had no knowledge of the passage of heated words between her and the mountain girl which had started Agnes's passionate outbursts. Nor did he seem to realize the intense rivalry between the two girls over Lin Columbia.

For some time after the two had gone he and Lin said nothing. Lin, in fact, had nothing to say. So he waited for Jeffrey to break the strained silence.

"What in thunder's the meaning of all this?" his partner burst forth at last. "What's that girl done with all of her money? That's what I want to know! And why can't she explain?"

Lin shook his head. "I'm not in a position to answer any of your momentous questions," he said. "I don't know what girls spend money for, aside from powder puffs and dill pickles. Get a whoopin' consignment of pickles and puffs for that amount of wampum, though. She must have been shootin' craps or somethin'."

Jeffrey seemed to take him seriously. "She never gambles," he said. "She's not extravagant, considering the amount of her income. She's never played with

fire in wildcat investments, either. Now what's she done with that coin?"

"I pass," Lin told him.

"I'll go and find out," decided the brother.

"No—not to-night. She's upset. Don't pester her, old student."

"But I can't understand it!" Jeff persisted.

"Don't try to. Forget it. How about squeezin' that stuff through the chamois to-morrow and gettin' our hard amalgam ready for Joyce's next trip to Porcupine?"

"You're going to try sending it after what happened to the last package?"

"Sure. Got to. Payday frowns at us. Le'me tell you all about that holdup, and what developed later. See if you think I've doped it right."

Lin then told his partner of the letter from Ozias Tyrone to Small John Copper, complaining that the gang had ridden off with bags of scrap iron instead of gold amalgam. He recounted Joyce's adventure with Noah Littlejohn in the back yard of Ralph Pearl's hotel. Then he "doped it out," according to his lights.

"Quite apparent," he stated, "that Ozias wanted the letter he wrote to Small John to fall into the hands of the *mestiza*. It was sent in care of her, which is more or less ridiculous, considering the small number of patrons of the Porcupine post office. Everybody in Porcupine knows Small John by now. Of course, Pearl knows him better than any one else there. Utterly absurd to send that letter in care of Joyce.

"Therein I see the subtle work of Noah Littlejohn. Black Ozias never would have thought of that. And Noah placed himself on hand to see what happened when the outfit eddied in and the letter was delivered. He sees Small John get it and take it to his tent to read. Knows it hasn't passed through the hands of

Joyce. Hangs about. Sees Joyce put on her one-ring performance that night, with Pearl as the clown. Knows she has read the letter, as was intended. He as much as tells her so when he has his little seance with her under the hotel window."

"Just why," asked Jeffrey, "did they want her to know the contents of that letter?"

"A little trick of Noah's to throw suspicion on Small John Copper."

"You don't think, then, that Small John double-crossed the gang and hid the amalgam in the timber, slipping Ozias and the others bags of clay balls filled with scrap iron?"

"No, I don't. Remember that Joyce said Small John looked as if he was scared stiff when he read the letter?"

"Acting, maybe."

"Not in him. He isn't up to it. Not enough pliable matter above his eyebrows, Jeffrey dear. That bird knows fear."

"Then you think that Ozias really got the gold?"

"Wouldn't you think so, son? Look here: Small John sneaks around and overhears our conversation about fooling the gang with iron scraps. He puts the gang on. They dope out a counter plot—that is, Noah Littlejohn does—to fool us in turn.

"They let Joyce know that they are perfectly aware that scrap iron went to Frisco instead of gold. They lead her to believe, also, that the bags they rambled away with contained scrap iron, too. Now, Jefflets, do they want it known generally that they stole our gold amalgam? Hardly. They know that we are fully aware of it. How do they know we won't get in touch with the sheriff at the county seat, enlist a posse and zephyr over to Tyrone Ranch to smoke up the whole shootin' match and recover the loot? So they get the

gold, all right, and play our own cards right back at us by trying to lead us to believe that Small John had double-crossed them and slipped scrap iron of his own into the pack.

"And if we fall for that, we're going to let sleeping dogs lie, aren't we, and not drift over to Tyrone with blood in our eye? No—if Black Ozias failed to get the gold, why pester him? Get after Small John Copper and find out where he's made his cache. It's not revenge we want, nor war. We want that gold. Do you gather me?"

"Yes, I guess maybe you're right," admitted Jeffrey.

"The only fault that I have to find with my own reasoning, however," Lin continued, "is that it's the bunk from one end to the other."

Jeffrey's brows contracted as he looked keenly at the face of his friend. "The bunk?" he asked.

"Absolutely, old lay figure. It sounds good until we consider Noah Littlejohn and his visit to Joyce behind Pearl's hotel."

"Go on. I'm all at sea again."

"There's an African in the gas tank," said Lin. "You forget one little point. That is that little Small John is frightened. How come?"

"Maybe he has good reason to be afraid."

"None whatever, if the dope I gave you is correct. Why leave *him* out of the plot? If Ozias and the rest of the gang corraled the amalgam, and intend to make us think they didn't, why try to fool Small John too? He's in with them to the eyebrows. Very necessary to their future plans. Why try to scare the livin' lights out of him, then? Why not let him know they're only trying to kid us?"

"I tell you Small John is only playing his part!" Jeff persisted.

"And I tell you that, as an actor, he couldn't play

the wart on Juliet's nose! He's made out of latigo leather and hoof parings from the chin up. He's seein' things, that pelican."

"All right. For the sake of argument we'll admit that he is incapable of acting. This means, then, that he doesn't know the gang got the gold and is only trying to fool us. He thinks, also, that Black Ozias actually believes he has double-crossed them. He must think, too, that you and Joyce fooled him as to the disposition of the gold in the packs, and that Ozias got scrap iron, while the gold went safely on to McDade and the mint. Right?"

"Of course."

"Then why does the gang hand him so much mental suffering? Why is he excluded from the plot? *So that he won't have to act.* They know he can't act—Noah does—so he really makes him think the gang suspects him, in order that he may be able to pull a solemn face and look sorry for himself and scared half to death. So that we will read those signs in the twisted little smear of putty and believe what they want us to believe."

"Pretty deep, Lin—pretty deep," was Jeffrey's comment. "From what I've heard of him, Ozias doesn't strike me as a man who could scheme like that."

"He can't," retorted Lin. "But Noah Littlejohn can. That's the bird whose wits are matched against ours. That's the bimbo we've got to fight. And he's worthy of our steel. Deep rascal—subtle as old Ma Quail trying to lure a hunter away from her hidden brood."

"And he's even subtler than I've made him out to you. There's a far deeper counter-plot eddying along underneath this whole business than shows on the surface. Noah deliberately went to Joyce that night and tried to snare her for his wife, didn't he? Let her

know—or at least, in his stealthy way, gave her to understand—that he had wanted her to read the letter that was sent to Small John. Told her he had a future, didn't he? Why'd he do that? I'll answer myself: He wanted to show her how foxy he is—wanted her to get the idea—not expressed in so many words—that *he* is going to double-cross the entire shootin' match when it comes to the final show-down."

"Do you mean, Lin, that he has got hold of that thirty thousand—that he means to get away with it and leave Ozias and the rest of them holding the sack?"

"Absolutely. And he intends to get away with the rest of the amalgam that we'll be shipping out. He'd do it, too, if it weren't for me. But I'm going to let him in for a lot of turmoil. When I follow that next shipment, I'll be gunnin' for Know-a-little John and not Small John Copper. If Noah hasn't got that first bunch of loot right now, he knows he's going to get it later. And I want to pencil a few notes on the margin of his prospectus."

Jeffrey Deville smiled thinly and with some skepticism. "You're running wild, Linneus," he said. "Too much imagination."

"A fellow needs some, believe me, to find out what Noah Littlejohn has for a hole card."

"But where do you get all this? On what do you base these wild conjectures?"

"Listen!"—and Linneus Columbia leaned forward in his chair: "What do you think of the story of the crooked express messenger who looked in the bags on the train and found that they contained iron scraps mixed in balls of clay?"

"Sounds plausible, doesn't it?"

"Not a-tall. Not to King Linneus II. An invention of Noah's to account for the gang's knowledge that our gold didn't go to San Francisco. Why not make

Joyce imagine that the gang, having failed to get the gold—according to their own story—thinks it went to Frisco? Wouldn't that be the logical thing to do?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And Black Ozias and his other men really think that Joyce thinks that. That wasn't mentioned in the letter, you'll remember. Noah told Joyce that on his own hook. Why? To prove to her that the gang really got the gold and are trying to fool her, but that he is going to beat them out of it and shower it on her if she'll hit the trail with him."

"Then tell me just what occurred, Lin. How came the balls of clay and iron to get into the pack bags of the tail-end mules and the gold to get into the packs of the leaders. Did Small John make the switch while Joyce was asleep?"

"I don't think that he did," replied Lin. "I don't think that he was supposed to do it. His job is merely to let the gang know when our gold is moving out. Noah Littlejohn attended to the switching of the canvas bags. He did that while Joyce was watching Small John Copper. Small John is their decoy. Noah is traveling right along with the outfit all the time."

"And how do you suppose he will eventually get the gold away from Ozias and the gang?"

"I can't answer that," said Lin. "I'm not going to try to answer it. What I've got to do is to see that I'm on hand when that moment comes. Leave it to him. Let him accomplish it; then I'll step on him and take it away from him."

Silence for a time. Then said Jeffrey: "If Noah Littlejohn is following the outfit, it is possible that he saw Joyce hide the gold beside the trail. He could have gotten it and substituted bags of iron for her to find when she returned that night."

"Clever, Jeffrey!" praised Lin. "He could have

done just that. But how did he know she was going to hide it beside the trail? And if he did, you must remember that it must follow that the gang beat it with other bags of iron, because Joyce hid what she thought to be the gold after the hold-up."

"Yes, of course. I'd forgotten that."

"And that's just what they did get away with, my son."

Jeff stared at him in bewilderment again. "But you've just said they didn't!" he protested.

"Fake," Lin explained. "Fake hold-up, Jeffrey. Nothing but a medicine show. Noah Littlejohn had the gold before Black Ozias and his gang confronted Joyce in the trail."

"They had it already?" gasped his companion.

"Not *they*, Jeffrey. I said Noah Littlejohn had it."

"Oh, I can't follow you at all!" groaned Jeff. "I'm going to bed. I think you're crazy."

"I know it," Lin confessed, with a grin. "But I'm gonta get that gold back, just the same."

CHAPTER XXXV

ANOTHER POCKET

JOYCE LARUE left the headquarters camp early next morning, carrying no gold amalgam. She saw to it that Small John Copper was aware no gold was being taken on that trip. Lin Columbia bade her good-by as she swung into her saddle.

"Don't worry," he told her. "Sit tight and wait. Everything will come out O.K. Next trip I'll show you that I'm right."

As if to prove that his optimism was well founded, the girl had not been three hours on the trail when a man hurried in from the Flytrap to let Lin know that, in stopping that morning, another rich pocket had been uncovered.

Lin mounted his horse and rode out, to find his partner jubilantly excited over the new discovery. The following day the two grasped hands over a mass of soft amalgam which, they estimated, would run in the neighborhood of sixty thousand dollars.

"Boy," said Lin, "we couldn't have struck her at a better time. Three days from now we'll send out the whole business—fifty thousand dollars' worth on hand and this pleasing conglomeration. If we get her to the mint safely, our troubles are over. High, wide, and handsome for us to the end of our earthly journey, Jeffrey dear. We're made. This'll overcome every

difficulty, and by the time we're needing more money the old gal will have produced it by the ton."

"But getting it out," said Jeffrey. "A hundred and ten thousand dollars, Lin. We're going to take no chances on such a pot as that."

"No, none whatever, old flagstaff. Leave it all to me."

"Not by any means," retorted his partner. "We're going to guard this shipment well."

"How, then?"

"You're going. I'm going. Tris Derry is going. There are at least half a dozen men in Tris's outfit whom he knows well and can trust, to a certain extent, even if they are only stiff's. That'll make nine. All nine of us will follow that gold to Porcupine, heavily armed."

"Be wastin' a lot of time," said Linneus. "Be keepin' quite a bunch of important hombres from workin' for four full days. Better leave this thing to me, Jefflets. Let me take her out my own way. I can't absolutely guarantee safe delivery to Pearl; but neither could the nine of us. I'd rather we didn't send that bunch, Jeff."

Jeffrey frowned. "It seems to me, Lin," he remarked crossly, "that you delight in taking great risks. What is the work of nine men for four days compared with a hundred and ten thousand dollars? Don't be bullheaded and foolish, Lin! Be sensible. Give me one good reason why we nine men can't protect that gold better than you could alone."

"I can't," replied Lin.

"Then, for heaven's sake, lay off!"

"You don't understand," persisted Lin. "I can give one good reason, but I don't want to."

"Then you are bullheaded for sure. I'm utterly surprised at you. To be quite frank, Linneus, you make me tired!"

Lin Columbia grinned at him. "Well," he said, "maybe you're right, old boy. I guess I am a pest. I know that the eight of you, however, will be wasting valuable time by shadowing that gold to Porcupine. Just the same, I guess it's better to let you have your way. I've got another scheme."

"I hope it's better than the ones you've already advanced," Jeffrey muttered.

"Don't pout, now, Jeffrey," soothed his friend. "Listen here: Remember how you sealed your bags of samples and made the imprint of your crest in the wax to prevent Noah Littlejohn from salting the stuff?"

"Certainly. How could I forget it?"

"Couldn't—unless you've gone into second childhood. But I've got to start somewhere in outlining my glittering prospectus, haven't I? You're pceevish, old disciple. Well, to proceed: Let's do the same thing with the bags in which we pack this mess out. Then you'll know, by examining them every night and every morning, whether you're still packing gold or whether somebody has slipped you a package of nails or something. If Joyce had examined the contents of her bags now and then during the trip she might have—well, might have had something more to tell us."

"You're growing enigmatical again, Lin. But I'm ready to inform you that what you have just suggested was already in my mind. I had fully determined to seal the bags as you describe. We have no sealing wax, I guess, but spruce gum will do. It's the impression of my signet ring that will count. It's a wonder to me that you didn't think of that before."

"I suppose it is," Lin returned. "But I did think of it, old fairy godmother."

"Then why didn't you put it into practice?"

"For reasons of my own."

"Oh! Um! And why do you suggest doing it now?"

"To beat you to it. I knew you would do it, so I thought I'd ramble under the wire ahead of you."

Exasperated with him, Jeffrey Deville grasped his shoulders and shook him.

"Lin," he said earnestly, "you're keeping something back. You know more about this business than you've told me. Now come across. What's it all about, anyway? I'm entitled to your confidence, am I not?"

"Jeff," Lin told him, "I've been waiting for you to get in the mood which you've just displayed. Now I can speak right out. There's a mighty good reason why I can't tell you—even you, I'll say."

Jeffrey shook Lin's shoulders again. "Come now, Lin—none of that! I'm your partner—your friend. You have no right to keep from me anything that concerns our joint business dealings—our friendship. I demand to know what you're driving at! Come across!"

Lin looked deeply into Deville's dark, honest eyes. He sighed, then, and turned away his head. Closing his eyes, he remained thoughtful for a moment, then quickly turned to face the other once more.

"Jeffrey," he said, "aside from me, who do you consider your best man friend on this toddling old planet?"

"Why—why, I guess Henry McDade fills the description," replied Jeffrey.

"I thought so," Lin returned. "I feared as much."

"Here! What do you mean? Are you accusing Mack of—Lin, you don't know him as I do. He's my friend—he was my father's friend. Why, Mack is—" Jeffrey paused and glared at his partner.

"You *would* have an explanation," said Lin in a reproachful tone. "Maybe you didn't read in the papers Joyce brought in day before yesterday about the big oil failure. You were too busy with your own troubles. Your friend is interested in oil, isn't he?"

"He has nearly everything he owns invested in it," said Jeff, his lips straight.

"Find those papers and read the news," Lin advised simply. "Then remember that McDade knew something about our plan to send out iron scraps balled in clay to fool the gang. You wrote him about that, didn't you?"

"Yes, I believe I mentioned it when I told him what we wanted him to do for us."

"Well, I guess McDade went fluey in the oil slump, Jeffrey. But I won't say any more. Figure it out for yourself. Remember, I don't accuse your friend of receiving our thirty thousand in amalgam, appropriating it, and writing you and Joyce that nothing had reached him but scraps of iron in balls of clay. I don't accuse him, I say. But think it over. We know, you'll admit, that Black Ozias claims to have gotten away with scrap iron.

"We have thought that he was lying. But it may be that our reasoning is all wrong. Maybe he was gypped, after all, and that the gold actually was sent to San Francisco by Joyce. If so—well, reach your own conclusion. I'll say no more about it."

"So that's why you think it unnecessary to have nine men go with Joyce Larue to guard the gold. You think that, with your aid, she is clever enough to keep it out of the outlaws' hands and ship it, but that my friend McDade will gobble it in the end."

"I told you to draw your own conclusions, Jeff. I'm sorry, old warhorse. But you dragged it out of me. I hate to see a man lose a friend. Mighty scarce—friends. I hate much more to be the cause of a man's losing a friend."

"I want to see those newspapers," said Jeffrey grimly, "before I'll even consider the matter."

"I'd do that," said Lin. "Guess the papers are still

floating about camp. I'm going in now. Look 'em up for you and put 'em away before somebody destroys 'em."

"I wish you would," said Jeffrey.

Lin mounted his horse, then reached down a broad, brown hand.

"Mighty sorry to have disturbed you so, old totem pole," he said sympathetically. "Hope I'm all wrong. Hope I'm a rotten guesser, honest."

"But listen, Lin," Jeffrey pleaded: "If you suspected Mack after reading the newspapers, why did you keep on harping about Noah Littlejohn's getting the gold away from Ozias, and all of that?"

"When did I do that?"

"Why, last night, of course."

"Well, I hadn't read the papers then. Didn't give 'em the once-over until just after breakfast this mornin'. You'd already rambled up here to the Flytrap."

"Then why didn't you save the papers for me to read? You seem to know that I haven't seen this news!"

"Maybe I did save 'em. And maybe I wasn't so all-fired anxious to have you read 'em until I knew whether my new theory was any good. You forced this theory out of me, you know. And so now I'll see to it that you get the papers when you come into camp to-night."

Hours later, however, when Jeffrey returned to the camp at the Peddler's Crutch, he was unable to find his partner. Agnes told him that Lin had ridden away through the timber shortly after he came back from his visit at the mines. She had not seen him since. Jeffrey made a search for the papers himself, but was unable to locate them in any of the tents. Inquiry among the laborers failed to disclose their whereabouts.

Night settled down. Jeffrey worked with his sister

in the office tent until nine o'clock, when she bade him good night and started to leave.

"Funny what's become of Lin," remarked Jeff, failing to make response to her courtesy.

"I've been wondering myself, Jeff," returned his sister, stopping with one hand holding the tent flaps and looking back. "I'm worried. But I didn't want to mention it and upset you, too."

"Oh, don't worry about that bird," said Jeffrey lightly. "He'll take care of himself. Mighty mysterious to-day. Guess he has something up his sleeve."

Agnes took a step back into the tent. "Jeff," she asked, "why were you so anxious to see those week-old papers?"

"Oh, just wanted to give the headlines the once-over," he returned evasively. "Didn't know I gave the impression of anxiety."

She started out again.

"Just a moment, Sis," he said suddenly. "If you're not in a hurry to go to bed, would you mind explaining the shock that you handed me last night? Can't you tell me what you've done with your savings?"

She set her lips. "I—I can't now," she said, trying to keep her voice firm. "I'm sorry, Jeff. But I must—must have an answer to a letter that I'm going to write before I can say anything definite. Please don't ask me to explain."

"But this is such an unheard-of proceeding," he complained.

"I know it—I'm sorry. But—but I can't explain it now. Good night."

"Good night," he returned meekly. "And don't worry," he added quickly. "You've heard, of course, about the big pocket we opened to-day."

"Yes," she replied. "Lin told me about it."

"It'll pull us through—if we can get it to the mint. So we won't need your money, after all."

"I'm glad," she said simply. "Good night."

When Jeffrey at last turned in, about half-past eleven o'clock, Lin Columbia had not returned.

CHAPTER XXXVI

REGISTERED MAIL

LIN COLUMBIA's saddle horse stood tied in the heavy timber that surrounded the camp at the Peddler's Crutch. Lin himself was some distance from his horse, crouched among the scraggly sagebrush that fringed the small tent city. It was close to half-past eleven at night, and Lin had been watching there for several hours.

Some time before he had seen Agnes leave the office tent as she bade her brother good night. It was too dark to see her figure moving through the trees as she sought her own tent, on the northern outskirts of the camp.

Suddenly the light went out in the office tent. Jeffrey Deville had gone to bed.

Then it was that Lin Columbia got quickly on his feet and stole silently into camp.

He reached one of the larger trees and flattened himself against its trunk, just as a mass of clouds floated from before the face of the moon. He waited there for perhaps ten minutes, and then he heard a soft foot-fall close at hand. Cautiously he peered around the trunk of the tree. He saw a figure traveling almost silently along. He stood watching it without a move.

Then he heard another sound. A second figure joined the first. The two stood together, apparently whispering, for Lin could not hear their voices. Then

they melted into the black shadow cast upon the ground by an enormous spruce tree.

For ten minutes, though he strained his ears and tried to pierce the blackness with his eyes, Lin neither heard nor saw anything of the stealthy pair.

Then of a sudden he saw both members of it. One was walking through the moonlight in one direction, the other on the opposite course. The moonlight elongated the shadows of their legs on the ground until they looked like two pairs of immense scissors clipping the grass away from a common center. Lin hesitated only a moment, then began stepping from shadow to shadow in the wake of the figure that was moving into the north.

He disregarded the other figure entirely as he passed softly on. He stopped frequently to listen, straining his ears after the man he was pursuing. Lin's feet were wrapped in gunnysacks to protect them from the ground, and he made almost no noise at all as he pressed forward. But every time he paused his keen ears were able to detect the soft noises of the quarry's progress through the trees.

To trail the other through almost total blackness was a difficult feat, but, because he made so little noise himself and paused often to listen, hastening forward after each stop, Lin accomplished it. It was made somewhat easier because the shadowed man seemed to be following the river. Sometimes the course that he was taking led him down to the level of the water; at other times it fringed the high banks where the river cut through cañons that were deep and rocky. So he assumed that the man ahead would continue to follow the watercourse, and pressed forward faster on that assumption.

Finally, however, he realized that he had lost his man. For some time, now, it had been useless for

him to stop and listen for the footfalls and breaking underfoot twigs ahead of him. This was because the man had kept close to the rushing Pipe-organ, whose riotous music drowned all other sounds. Lin stuck to the river, however, trusting that the quarry had not cut away from it to the hills. And presently, just as he was beginning to think with bitterness that his task was a hopeless one, he saw a light twinkling ahead of him through the woods.

He kept on eagerly but cautiously. Now he saw the light; now the trunks of the conifers hid it from view. But it was somewhere up the river, for the rushing of the green waters was still loud in his ears.

He stopped suddenly. Ahead of him, in a rocky overhang above the river, he saw the face of a large white stone. In back of that stone there was a fire or a lighted candle. The light remained stationary, and after a little Lin moved cautiously toward it and halted when quite near.

It was above him in the rocks. He was obliged to hold his head back considerably to watch it. Past that lighted stone the river raced, some thirty feet or more below it.

It seemed to the woodland sleuth that the man he had been following had entered a cave or some deep depression in the rocks above the river. The light was shining from this niche directly across the churning waters, lighting that face of the rock that was toward the watcher. It would be impossible for Lin Columbia to see into that niche unless he were on the other side of the Pipe-organ, secreted in a nest of rocks that stood abreast the ones which made the quarry's hiding place.

This fully decided, Lin began stripping off his clothes. He tied them and his heavy Colt and cartridge belt in a bundle on the top of his head. Then

he stepped into the riotous stream, and was swimming frantically almost on the instant.

The swift current bore him along at a rapid rate, and when his elastic strokes had brought him to the other bank he was fifty yards below the spot where he would have landed had the water not diverted him from his course.

He clambered out, shivering with cold, and hastily dressed again. Fifteen minutes later he was seeking a passage through the immense stones that stood directly opposite the shining light on the other bank of the Pipe-organ.

Between the two clusters of stones the river was narrow, and its waters plunged downward in a cataract perhaps fifteen feet in height. Clambering over the tops of the stones, pressing his way between others, Lin at last found himself lying prone on a rocky floor, with only one large, jagged stone between him and the light across the waterfall.

He rested, got upon his knees, and slowly climbed to the top of the stone before him, which was half as large as an ordinary bungalow. Lying flat on top of it, he crept forward until what he had worked so hard to see lay before him.

There was in reality a deep depression on the other side of the plunging cataract. The sloping faces of large stones, piled there ages ago, were responsible for it. It was perhaps twelve feet in depth by as many in width and height. In the mouth of the cave there burned a small fire of spruce limbs. A few blackened cooking utensils, a saddle and bridle, a Winchester and a belt filled with cartridges, and a few provisions were visible. But no human occupant of the cave was in sight.

However, before Lin had taken a complete invoice of the contents of the rocky nook, a figure stepped

into plain view, between the watcher and the blaze. It was the figure of a man, and in his arms he carried a load of wood for the fire. He cast the load to the stone floor, stooped and, using a stick for a poker, began stirring up the coals. The light played upon the ghostlike, peeled-looking face and the sagging, bloodshot eyes of Noah Littlejohn.

He warmed himself at the replenished fire, for the night was cold. For ten minutes, while Lin Columbia watched him, he sat there brooding, looking mournfully into the flames. Then suddenly he bestirred himself, spread his saddle blankets and, crawling in back of the fire, went to bed with all his clothes on, using his saddle for a pillow.

Then Lin softly slid down behind the stone on which he had lain and took up the trail toward camp.

Dawn was still far off when he reached his destination. He passed through the silent camp and found his horse, which he had not been obliged to use, where he had left it on the other side. He mounted, rode into camp, corraled and fed the animal and went to the office tent, where he managed to crawl into bed in the darkness without disturbing Jeff Deville.

He was awakened some hours later by a familiar voice.

"Well," remarked Jeffrey, "when did you blow in?"

The cook's gong was ringing for breakfast. Lin sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Oh, early this morning," he replied truthfully.

"Where have you been?"

"Scouting. Just lookin' around."

"Well, find out anything?"

"Plenty. Tell you about it later, maybe."

"Tell me now," pleaded Jeff.

"Nope—too sleepy. Go on to breakfast. I'm go-

ing to hit 'er up for half an hour longer and eat by myself later."

"All right—have your way about it, old enigma. But I don't think you're treating your friend and partner square."

"Squarer than you know, Jeffrey," Lin said earnestly. "Now get to the dickens outa here—I wanta sleep."

"Lin, I couldn't find those newspapers," Jeffrey told him, as he slipped on his shoes.

But a purring snore was his only answer.

Without waking his partner, Jeffrey Deville, when he came from breakfast, attended to certain light duties in the office tent, warned Agnes away until Lin had risen and mounted his horse to ride to the mines. Lin did not join him all that day, and when Jeff returned at night his sister informed him that the blue-eyed mystery had ridden forth again shortly after noon and had not returned. Lin was not at the supper table that night.

While the camp was eating, however, Joyce Larue and her pack outfit arrived. Before Deville and his sister had left the table, the mistress of the mules came in, tired and hungry, with a bunch of mail under her arm. She greeted the two, asked after Lin Columbia, and distributed a portion of the mail between them. Together with several letters, she handed Agnes a bulky package, on which her brother noticed the red ink of a registration stamp.

Scarcely glancing at it, Agnes laid it one side and, having finished her meal, began reading her letters, while Jeffrey talked with Joyce about her trip. When the three finally left the dining tent, Jeffrey noted that his sister had not unwrapped her piece of registered mail. She carried her letters and the package to her

own tent at once, returning to the office tent later to join Joyce and Jeffrey.

They were barely seated when the tent flaps parted and Lin Columbia came in.

"Greetings!" he said. "Lady of the mules, welcome back. Good news awaits you, unless somebody has already sprung it. To-morrow morning you'll pack, not fifty thousand dollars in gold, but a hundred and ten thousand dollars' worth. And if you get it to the mint the clouds will have departed and the sun will beam forever over the bonanza in Flytrap Cañon!"

"My goodness!" cried Joyce. "Do you mean—"

"Rich pocket uncovered since you left, *mestiza*," Lin told her. "Runs about sixty thousand. Put us in the clear for many a day. Turn the edges of the clouds to gold. Canst get her to the mint?"

"I—I'll try."

"Angels could do no more."

"You'll get it there, all right," Jeffrey put in. "Nine men are going along with you to see that it reaches Porcupine. Then I'm going to San Francisco with it to see it retorted and safely in the hands of the government."

"Just like that!" muttered Lin. "Not even sending it to McDade this time, eh?"

"No," said Jeffrey doggedly. "And, by the way, where did you put those papers we were talking about, Lin?" He gave Lin a significant look.

"Failed to locate 'em, old warhorse," replied his partner. "Maybe you'll find something about what you want to see in the later papers which Joyce must have brought out with her."

"I'll get them from the pack," said Joyce. "They were so bulky that I separated them from the other mail and—"

"Never mind now, please," interrupted Jeffrey quick-

ly. "See them later. Let's talk about our plan to guard the gold to-morrow."

"Did you bring it in to-day?" asked Lin.

"Yes. It's here in the tent."

"I've got the bags all ready, Lin," said Agnes. "It's all wrapped and packed."

"And while she was attending to that," Jeffrey spoke up, "I collected a lot of spruce gum. Let's melt it now and pour it over the knots in the drawstrings. Then I'll press my signet ring into the hot gum."

"Oh, let me see it first, won't you?" pleaded Joyce Larue. "I've never set eyes on so much gold as that."

Jeffrey looked at her in an odd way. "Didn't you ever look into the bags of gold that you were packing out?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Why, no," the girl replied.

"If you had done so," he returned, "you might have relieved all of us of no small amount of worry and puzzlement."

"Just what do you mean, please?"

"We have decided—Lin and I—that perhaps you didn't even carry gold to Porcupine—that, when you rode back that night and picked up the bags that you had hidden beside the trail, you may have packed in iron scraps instead of amalgam. Weren't you curious in the least, Joyce? Didn't you permit yourself one little peep into those bags?"

"I was curious, I'll admit," she said. "I wanted to look when I had the bags beside me in my tent at night. But I never peeped once."

"Why?"

"Well, I considered it not just the thing to do," she answered. "I don't know why. The gold was entrusted to me. The bags were securely knotted. I'd no more think of untying those knots and feasting my

eyes on that gold than I would consider opening a letter of yours and reading it. It's the way I'm built—that's all."

"Reasonable explanation—logical—easy to take," put in Lin. "But don't let your curiosity get the better of you now, Joyce. Agnes has the gold all wrapped up in separate packages, I guess, and—"

"Oh, no trouble whatever to unwrap some of them," Agnes interrupted. "I'd love to look at it again myself. I'm not a miser nor a money-lover, I hope, but it's simply fascinating to look at those yellow balls and think of their value."

She rose and stepped to a trunk, which she unlocked with a key. She worked over the knots of one of the gold bags inside of it, then called to the others. They stepped to her side as she unwrapped the paper from one of the weighty balls that the bag contained.

Joyce uttered a low cry as her eyes caught the dull gleam of the precious metal that meant so much to all concerned.

"Bags of scrap iron ready, Sis?" asked Jeffrey.

"Yes, they're under your bed."

"We'll not seal them," said her brother. "We'll seal only the bags containing the amalgam. Light a candle, somebody. We'll melt the gum right now and affix our official seal. We can glance at the bags, then, any time we want to during the trip in, and if the seal is unbroken we can be as sure that the gold is safe as if we'd opened the bags and investigated."

"Good idea, old man," muttered Lin Columbia. "But you'll remember that once it didn't work. Shoot, though. What you say unto me is the Lord said unto Moses. Three rousing cheers for the family crest of the Devilles. May she convey our fortune safely into the hands of Uncle Sam!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

THROUGH CLOUDS OF DUST

THE morning came bright and clear. Despite the altitude, a hot day was in the making. A hush was in the air. The Pipe-organ slipped softly along, its boisterousness lowered to a strange emotional murmuring.

The gold was packed in eight bags, the original fifty thousand dollars' worth in four of them, the recently amalgamated sixty thousand dollars' worth in four others. Mules near the head of the column carried eight bags of scrap iron balled in clay. Certain others who were to travel midway of the column carried the fifty thousand dollars' worth of amalgam. The later accumulation was packed by four mules moving in the rear.

Tristram Derry and the six men that he has chosen for the important task of guarding the gold to Porcupine were armed and ready to ride on saddled mules or horses with the procession. Jeffrey Deville and Tris Derry were mounted, ready to depart. Everybody was ready, in fact, save Linneus Columbia.

"I think he was out again all night," Jeffrey whispered to the contractor. "He'll show up soon, I guess, for he knows we ought to get an early start. Confound him! I don't get his drift at all."

They waited ten minutes impatiently. Then Jef-

frey Deville, with a frown of annoyance on his face, gave the command for the outfit to march.

"Can't wait for him any longer," he said to Agnes, who, white of face over the danger that her brother might be riding into, stood looking up at him. "He'll catch up with us, no doubt. Tell him to hurry, Sis, if he rides in after we're gone."

He leaned from his saddle and kissed her tenderly. "Don't worry now," he said. "We can take care of ourselves. We've got the gang outnumbered right now. They'll hesitate this trip before making an effort to hold us up. Good-by."

He lifted his horse to a gallop and joined Joyce Larue and Tris Derry, who were riding in the rear of the column of mules.

For an hour the outfit moved along peacefully. With Small John Copper riding in the lead, the mules left the valley of the Pipe-organ and worked their way far above it. Below them the river, jade green, twinkled brightly in the hot morning sun. Higher and higher his hot face rose, and closer and closer became the air. The dust ascended from the marching hoofs of the train. Joyce turned her neckerchief around and pulled it up over her nostrils.

Little conversation passed among the three who rode in the rear. The only sounds were the shuffle-shuffle of tiny hoofs in the dusty trail, the occasional rattling of a stone as it was dislodged and went bounding down the precipitous slopes into the Pipe-organ. Joyce, Derry, and Jeff Deville all labored under an intense mental strain. None of them expected a raid that side of the Paddlefish. And they knew they would not be nearing the Paddlefish until close to noon next day. They had been on the move an hour, but because of their many windings up from the river they caught occasional glimpses of the camp they had just left

when outjutting bends in the trail offered a backward view.

No, they had nothing to fear that day, they told themselves. The outlaws never would think of attacking them so close to the Peddler's Crutch, with help almost within shouting distance. Yet the girl and all of the men who rode with her to guard her precious freight seemed nervous, and the clattering of a stone down the slopes brought every one of them up with a start of apprehension.

Then, with the dirty-white tents of the camp in plain view below them, scarcely a mile distant as flies the crow, it happened. From the side of the trail came an unexpected fusillade of shots. Art Carey, riding midway of the procession, leaped from his saddle to the ground, staggered to the edge of the precipice, drew back, spun about three times, and sank slowly to his knees.

A mule near the head of the column plunged into the air, went down. Those immediately behind him became panic-stricken. They reared and lunged while their fallen comrade was trying ineffectually to struggle to his feet again. They caromed into one another, kicked, sprawled about, and one was shoved over the edge, to go rolling over and over with the rapidity of a hoop as he shot down toward the green water below. Up floated his agonized squeal of fright.

A dense cloud of dust had risen the moment that the mules became frantic. It enveloped the entire outfit with miraculous rapidity, then hung there obstinately. Through it mules lunged about, struggled to the cliff above the trail, some of them falling back and thumping on the hard ground, others sprawling over them and trampling them with their hoofs. Men shouted to one another uselessly. All was confusion. In the midst of it another volley of rifle shots clattered among

the rocks, and the sounds went leaping off across the deep cañon, to be cast back again and again as echoes by the hills on the other side.

A man was screaming when the guns ceased speaking. Others were out of their saddles. Horses whistled with fear and charged into one another. The horse that Jeffrey rode lifted himself to his hind feet and tried to walk back home, ending up with one front leg in Joyce's lap, and the other behind the cantle of her saddle. And over all hung the dust and smoke.

Shots rang out again. The beleaguered party was doing nothing whatever to protect themselves or the gold that they were supposed to guard. They could do nothing; they could see almost nothing of one another—could see nothing at which to fire. Rearing, trampling, squealing mules and horses—eddying clouds of throat-biting dust—the heart-chilling explosions of rifles—hoarse shouts, born of fear and without all reason—the smell of sweating animals and burned powder and dust and blood!

Then certain guards broke free and went galloping back along the trail that led down to the river's level. One ridden mule crashed into Joyce, as she struggled to draw her six-shooter and rid herself of the lunging horse that had halfway mounted her own. One of her thighs was numb where the shod hoof of Jeffrey's animal had struck it when he leaped upon her.

Her horse crouched as the fleeing mule and rider crashed into them. This gave Jeffrey's gray the chance to rear again and free himself, but as he did so he raked the girl's leg with the calk of one shoe and tore the saddle from under her with the other. Her saddle clung to her horse's side as Joyce, literally dragged to the ground, threw her arms before her eyes and tried to rise from the threatening hoofs of the two horses above her.

In some strange way, she never knew just how, she crawled free of the thudding hoofs that threatened her life. She thought, afterward, that she crawled directly under her own horse, for of a sudden she found herself on the edge of the precipice, drawing back frantically to keep herself from plunging over.

"Jeffrey! Jeffrey!" she called, but the barking of rifles and the frantic noises of the stampede drowned her cries.

With her handkerchief once more over her nose and mouth to shut out the dust, she stood upon her trembling legs. Her gun was out. She crouched and tried to see through the clouds of dust, from which leaping horses raced back along the trail. Then a thunder of hoofs was in her ears. She lifted her gun, fired point-blank at a man who rode past her—a man with a black mask over his face. She missed, fired again at his back. He pitched forward over his horse's neck, righted himself, and with his body listed sidewise in the saddle, disappeared into the dust cloud again.

She knew, somehow, what was the meaning of the concerted galloping that had preceded her shot. The outlaws, having the advantage over the others entirely, had been able to ride down and herd the mules ahead of them along the trail toward Porcupine. Several of Derry's "stiffs" had deserted, how many she did not know. Derry and Jeffrey were helplessly handicapped. Art Carey was down. Small John Copper had, of course, joined his friends. The raiders, then, knowing what they wanted to do, above the clouds of dust and able to see what was taking place below them, had realized their victory and had ridden in to drive the entire pack train ahead of them up the trail.

A lunging horse, foam-flecked, was upon her before she realized her danger. There was a masked rider on his back. The horse had leaped directly at her from

the heavy dust clouds. She fired as she threw herself to the ground—fired directly at the horse's foaming white breast. The animal screamed, reared back, shot into the air, and leaped entirely over her except for one dragging hoof that banged against her head. Then he fell, and for Joyce Larue everything went suddenly black.

When she opened her eyes all was quiet about her. The dust had settled. The sky was clear above her, the sun like molten metal. She struggled to a sitting posture, raised a hand to her burning head, gazed in childish wonder into the deep cañon on whose lip she had lain unconscious. She turned her face about and looked in equal mystification at the grotesque objects in the trail.

There lay a black horse breathing his last, his body heaving and the breath whining in his throat. There lay a mule entirely motionless. Another mule, some distance down the trail, was struggling desperately to get upon his feet, a piteous look in his gleaming eyes. Another mule sat disconsolately in the middle of the path—sat like a dog—and his head was drooped forward until his muzzle nearly touched the ground.

Art Carey lay up the trail, motionless. Close by lay another man, face down, a man whom Joyce knew only by sight. Tris Derry sat about twenty feet away from the girl and stared at her like a drunken man, his eyes bleary and denied the power of sight. Jeffrey Deville, Small John Copper, and the remainder of the six laborers whom the contractor had enlisted were gone.

Joyce passed her hand again across her aching brow. She pressed her fists into her eyes, shook her head. Then she struggled slowly to her feet and staggered across toward Derry.

"Mr. Derry," she mumbled brokenly, "where's Jeff?

Why don't you answer me? Why don't you look at me, Mr. Derry?"

Tris Derry raised his head, stared at her out of filmy eyes, and, with a sigh, lowered his chin to his breast again.

A canvas desert waterbag lay on the ground a short distance off. Reeling drunkenly from one side to the other, the girl approached it, and fell flat when she stooped to pick it up. She laughed a little, even though her head ached so terribly. She reached out a hand, dragged the waterbag in to her.

She fumbled with the stopper, and twisted the cork from the glass mouth with a superhuman effort. The hot water gurgled down her throat. She rested a minute, looked dully at her ragged riding skirt where the shoes of Jeffrey's horse had mutilated it, and became conscious of the burning wound beneath it in her thigh.

She roused herself, crawled over to Derry, lifted the glass neck of the canvas bag to his dry, half-open lips.

Then came the sudden clatter of hoofs, and Lin Columbia galloped around a bend in the trail. And behind him, with tears making zigzag streaks in the dust on her face, rode Agnes Deville.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE BLACK PIT

THEY had done all that they could for the wounded man. They had lifted Tris Derry to a shady spot in the trail, and left him with a water-bag close by. The drink that the girl had given him had revived him, and he begged them to let him lie and rest.

Art Carey and the homeless tramp who had come along to help guard the gold in order to earn the extra bit of money were beyond their aid. Now Joyce Larue and Agnes Deville and Lin Columbia rode away through the sun-scorched chaparral into the northeast, and they rode with all the speed of which their hampered animals were capable.

Lin had not taken the time to explain his absence. He had asked Joyce if she was able to ride with him and help him. She had replied by struggling to the back of her horse, which Lin had seen wandering down the trail, his saddle almost under his belly, and brought along. Agnes in a tragic voice had refused to leave them, and she was riding behind Joyce, an occasional sob welling up in her throat and shaking her to the very core of her being.

From a great distance they heard occasionally the reports of rifles. It was this that finally caused Joyce to question Lin.

The girl's head still ached terrifically, and her thigh

pained her cruelly. But the water that she had drunk and used to bathe her temples had driven the stupor from her mind. She was suffering, but ready for anything that the man she loved might have in mind to turn defeat to victory.

"I think," Lin answered her question, turning in his saddle and smiling back at her, "that Jeff and some of the bunch have come up with the gang and are keeping them busy. Or else they themselves have been cornered by the gang and are putting up a fight. He's a fightin' fool, that old pelican. He was after 'em, I'll bet, as soon as he saw the light. I know he took a couple of Tris's stiffs along. I bumped into the deserters as I caromed up the trail. Only three of 'em were hittin' it up to weep it out on mother's knee. I tried to head 'em and herd 'em back up here, but they wouldn't herd. Couldn't shoot 'em down, and hadn't time to show 'em that Bunker Hill wasn't held that way. So I called 'em a noun, modified by sixteen preliminary adjectives, and rode on without 'em."

Their horses were obliged to breast their way at a walk through dense chaparral at this point in their journey, and conversation was possible.

"I went down pretty early in the racket, Lin," said Joyce. "Who would have expected them to attack us so close to camp!"

"Not I, for one," Linneus returned. "That was a complete surprise—a clever move on the part of Black Ozias. He made a clean sweep, too. Drove almost every mule ahead of his gang up the trail, then cut through the timber with 'em. But old Jeff must have rallied at least a couple of the stiffs and gone on the warpath after him. I'm right proud of the old hellfringer. Hope he doesn't get nipped. He's accomplishing nothing, however—only risking his life. But it can't be helped."

"Lin, where are we going?" the *mestiza* asked.

"Down into the cañon of the Pipe-organ, when we reach a place where the descent is possible, then up the other side. And we're going fast once we've left this chaparral."

"Where were you? Why didn't you come along with the outfit?"

"I couldn't. I hadn't found out where the gold was hidden. Didn't until early this morning, just after dawn. Too late then to join you, though I rode hard. Rambled into camp to take the trail, so I could make better time, and found that Agnes had just ridden out. Fanned this old trotter into a run and caught up with her. Just then we heard the sounds of the scrap. Tried to keep her from continuing on with me, but she stuck to me like poison oak."

"You say that you didn't know where the gold was hidden until after dawn this morning?" Joyce cried in surprise.

"Yep—you got me."

"But—but I don't understand, unless you are referring to the thirty thousand dollars' worth that was stolen from me before."

"Referrin' to that," he told her.

"And have you located it?"

"Yep—got her pegged, all right."

"But why, then, don't you let that go and ride to help Jeff and the others in their attempt to get back the hundred and ten thousand that the gang got to-day?"

"They didn't get it. It's cached, too, with the thirty thousand."

"What! Lin, what are you saying?" Joyce cried.

"Fact. Ozias and his bunch lost out to-day. They rambled away with the entire pack-train, almost, but they're gypped."

"Lin, I can't follow you," she complained. "Don't be enigmatical."

"Can't tell you much now," he said. "Gotta ride hard as soon as we're clear of this brush, and I see open country just ahead. Tell you everything later on. We've got to hurry now and get that gold before something happens."

"But, if you discovered it this morning, why didn't you get it?"

"Couldn't handle it alone," was his reply. "Might have, if I'd had a rope. But I was ridin' without one on my saddle. I've been mining too long, Joyce, to ride like a gentleman of the range. I've grown careless since I ceased holdin' the portfolio of longhorn secretary to Ozias Tyrone, of Tyrone Ranch. Look now—the chaparral is thinning. Let's ride like—er—anything you can think of—when we strike out."

Half a minute more and they were out of the thicket. Lin lifted his horse to a gallop, and the two girls followed suit. At a great distance away from them a rifle occasionally barked. They left the timber and came out on the lip of the cañon above the Pipe-organ. With Lin leading the way down a less precipitous slope, they zigzagged in and out, their horses often threading precarious paths, toward the jade-green water that rolled below them in the sun.

After overcoming many difficulties, the horses reached the floor of the cañon. Their riders forced them into the river, and they swam across. The cañon-side here was not so nearly perpendicular, and they encountered fewer obstacles in working their slow way to the summit of the reddish bluffs.

On top, Lin Columbia led the way up the river. They finally found themselves in a cluster of freakish, gigantic red rocks that extended for over half a mile back from the cañon's rim. These huge stones re-

sembled stacks of enormous pancakes, and their soft sandstone surfaces were guttered and carved grotesquely by ancient waters and the hand of time.

In and out among them Lin's horse nosed his way. Lin stopped him finally and dismounted. He took his lariat from the right-hand fork of his saddle. The rocky ground underfoot had become so uneven that further use of the animals was out of the question.

With the two girls following, Lin led the way for some distance into the army of stones. The rushing river below them was no longer visible. The blistering red rocks and the hot sky above them were all that they could see.

But presently the man stopped abruptly and motioned to his followers. The two girls stepped to his side.

He was standing on the edge of another precipice. It overhung a tributary to the Pipe-organ, a turbulent creek that rushed downward to the larger stream over shelves in the rocks. There was a cataract every hundred feet.

"Gotta go carefully here, sisters," Lin announced.

And with that he stepped upon a narrow rock shelf that hung dangerously over the riotous branch.

Joyce followed him. Agnes, biting her lip, slipped in behind the other girl.

For nearly a hundred feet they walked cautiously along, with the roaring water below them. In places the shelf was barely eighteen inches wide. The rocks dropped straight downward from their feet on the one side and towered above them on the other. A slip of the foot meant death.

But at length the man walking ahead disappeared into darkness. A light showed in his hand as Joyce came up to him. He had taken from his hip pocket a large electric torch, and was playing the light of it

hither and thither over rocky walls that surrounded an inclosure on three sides.

They had entered a little roundish cave perhaps twenty feet in diameter. Lin waited until both girls were standing at his side, then walked forward into the cave and trained the light downward.

Agnes uttered a little cry of fright and astonishment. Below them yawned a deep hole in the heart of the stones, black and forbidding.

"The gold's down there," Lin informed them. "From the other side of the little creek below us I saw Noah Littlejohn lower it into this pit with a rope. Having no rope with me, I was unable to get it out after Noah left this morning and I found my way over for an investigation. So I rode to camp to get one."

"How much of it is there, Lin?" asked Joyce in a tone of awe.

To her vast surprise, Lin turned to the white-faced Agnes. "How much, Sister?" he asked. "You answer that question."

He trained his light on her, but when he saw the horror on her face he flashed it elsewhere at once.

"All of it, Lin," she made reply in a low voice. "The thirty thousand that was stolen before and the hundred and ten thousand that was to go out to-day."

"A hundred and forty thousand dollars' worth," said Lin. "All that has been taken from our mines since we opened them up, with the exception of the ten thousand that was sent out with Terry's packer. And now let's get her out."

Joyce said nothing. She was filled with wonder, and in her stanch heart sympathy welled up for the miserable girl at her side. She hadn't the slightest knowledge of how Agnes came to know the whereabouts of the gold amalgam—couldn't guess how it came to be there instead of in the hands of Ozias or Noah Little-

john. But she realized that Agnes was in deep trouble, that she was undergoing the most humiliating experience of her life, and she felt nothing but sorrow for her. In the darkness she reached out and found the other girl's hand. As she pressed it and drew it to herself, a hot tear fell on her own hand, and she heard a heart-breaking sob deep down in Agnes's throat.

Then the light flashed her way. She saw something in Lin's hand that she had not noticed he was carrying before. It was a steel hook, about eight inches long, such as is used in the handling of baled hay. It was made fast to one end of his lariat.

"Gonta fish her out," he explained. "Quite a bunch of bags to be dragged up. If we can't hook all of 'em with this, we'll have to arrange for me to go down on the rope. Then you girls can haul the stuff up, bag at a time. After it's up, you can fasten the rope—or brace yourselves and hold it—while I climb it.

"Joyce," he said, "it's up to you to watch the surrounding country while I fish for the dandelions. I'm expecting Noah Littlejohn to show up at any moment. He's with the gang now, of course, playing his part. But I think that, if he has learned that I wasn't one of the guards that accompanied the outfit, he'll give the gang the slip and get over here to watch his nest-egg.

"He thought somebody was following him this morning. Being obliged to watch him so carefully to see that he didn't look back and spy me, I caught my foot in a root and sprawled flat, making something of a noise. He looked back, decided that he had better investigate, and came toward me. I was lying where I had fallen, in a bed of ferns. I lizarded myself away from there and crept into a little draw. He could discover nothing threatening, but as he went on he looked back suspiciously now and then. It kept me

busy to trail him after that. So, knowing that the deluded gang of which he is a member is fighting for nothing over there, he'll give 'em the shake at the first opportunity and make it over this way. Watch for him, Joyce. If he comes and starts something, I guess you know what to do."

"Can he get here any way but by the shelf over which we came?" Joyce asked.

"No."

"Then he'll never get here"—and Joyce, removing her six shooter from its holster, stepped to the entrance of the cave.

"Lin," said Agnes in low tones, "I want to explain everything."

"Don't," he discouraged her. "Not now. And tell it to Joyce when you do tell it. I don't want to hear."

He stepped toward her and took her hand. "There! There!" he soothed. "We all make mistakes, Agnes. I'm gonta forget this one of yours. Now hold the torch, and train the light down into the hole, while I pick mustard greens with my little hook."

Wiping her moist eyes, Agnes Deville took the torch, and stepped to the edge of the chasm, where she sat down on the stone floor. She trained the light down the yawning throat, and on the bottom, about thirty-five feet below, the bulky canvas bags were plainly visible.

Lin lowered his hook. When it was directly over the bags he lowered it more gently, and began swinging it back and forth. At last it engaged itself with the drawstring of a bag, and slowly Lin began drawing the first unit of the treasure to his feet.

He landed his load safely, unhooked, and lowered his rope for another catch.

It was a slow process, for the bags were tightly tied, and the point of the hook slipped off time and again.

But Lin was patience itself, and Agnes watched his dainty manipulations silently. Finally, however, the strain became too great for her.

"Lin," she said passionately, "I must talk. I can't stand this silence. It's killing me! Let me tell you everything, won't you?"

"If you feel that you must talk," he answered, "go on. But I'd rather you'd tell Joyce instead of me."

CHAPTER XXXIX

AGNES'S STORY

"Of course you know," Agnes began, "that it was I who prepared all of the amalgam for shipment to Porcupine."

Lin muttered an affirmative reply.

"One day I met that detestable man you call Noah Littlejohn in the timber close to our camp. He was sneaking about suspiciously, and I had ridden fairly upon him before either of us was aware of it.

"I was frightened, and turned my horse's head at once to ride into camp, and tell you or Jeff about him. But he grinned at me, and told me not to be afraid of him—that he had been wanting to see me, and had something to tell me. This aroused my curiosity, of course, and I waited at a distance from him to hear what he had to say.

"And now, Lin, before I tell you what his proposal was I—I must tell you something that—that—Oh, I can't tell you! I can't!"

"Don't try, then," Lin advised her softly. "I understand. You've told me about it already in a dozen ways since the day I met you. You won't consider me egotistical if I say it for you, will you? You love me, don't you—or think you do?"

He glanced at her shamefacedly. Her cheeks were flaming, and her dark eyelashes hid her eyes.

"Yes," she said in a low voice, "I—I love you. I wanted you, Lin. I realized that you loved Joyce more

than you did me. I knew that what she would be able to do to help you was beyond my power. I came into the Pipe-organ Country to try and convince you that I could be of use to you—that I could help you always—to try and win you away from her. I realize now, though, that my task was hopeless. I have nothing to offer you to compare with what she can give. You're her kind; she is yours. I—I've lost, that's all. It's killing me, but I'm going to brave it through and pay the price."

Lin said nothing. He was too much embarrassed to speak. This girl had confessed her love for him—had laid her soul bare for him—and he found himself unable even to offer words of sympathy.

"I realized some time ago that I was losing," she continued in a strained, tired voice. "I realized that Joyce, with her courage and daring, and her ability to accomplish the strange things that you admire, was making more of an impression on you than I was with my silly pecking at the typewriter, fussing over you, and—and trying to please you in the way that I've always pleased the men of the city in whom I might be interested. I wanted to do something big like she was doing. I became sentimental as a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl, and when Noah Littlejohn made his strange proposition to me, I—I fell for it.

"That man seemed to read me, Lin—to ferret out my innermost weaknesses. I could see in his strange eyes that he knew I would accept his weird plan before he had fully outlined it to me. He took me into his confidence from the start, and told all about the activities of Tyrone's gang.

"He said that Tyrone's spy, Small John Copper, had hidden behind our office tent, and heard us planning to deceive the gang with scraps of iron.

"He—Small John—found out, too, that, in line with

my other office work, I was going to prepare the gold for shipment, and mix the scrap iron with the clay, and make balls of it to go into the other bags. And—and he showed me how I could—how I might do something to—to offset what Joyce was doing every day, and raise myself in your opinion. Oh, I was silly—stupid—disgustingly sentimental! But I—I listened to him.

“He said that Small John Copper had told him I was—was in love with you. He said that you cared for Joyce Larue, that she was the only kind of a girl that you could admire. He said I hadn’t a chance in the world unless I did something big to show you that I could be of help to you.

“He told me, then, how he was planning to double-cross Ozias and the rest of the gang, get all of the gold for himself, and skip the country. He loved Joyce Larue, he told me, and he wanted me to help him get her away from you. The best way to do that, he claimed, was for me to win you myself. His plan would benefit both of us, so I—I entered into partnership with him.

“He said that the gang was afraid to turn the gold into money directly after they had stolen it. They realized that they were under suspicion, and that, if they didn’t keep their loot hidden for a long time after the hold-ups, they might have the sheriff and a posse down upon them. So they had decided to cache it somewhere in the hills, and let it lie for several years.

“This, at least, was the plan that Noah Littlejohn had proposed to Ozias, and Ozias had accepted it. They already believed that we suspected Small John Copper of being a spy. So together they concocted the letter to Small John, hoping that it would fall into Joyce’s hands, so that we would suspect Small John of double-crossing them. This, of course, was Noah’s

work, designed to fool Tyrone, whom he meant all along to beat out of the plunder.

"The remainder of his plan was for me to give the gold to him the night before it was to go out. He had made some balls of inferior metal, which looked like gold amalgam, provided one didn't give them close scrutiny. He said that they would easily fool Black Ozias, who knew little about mining and matters connected with it. He gave these balls to me—hid a large quantity of them in the timber where I could find them when I needed more. The gang would make away with these instead of the gold. He would let them have a look at the balls before they were cached, and he intended to take the gold that I was to give him on nights before shipments, and hide it here. He meant to take me to it to-night, so that I would be able to find it when I wanted it.

"So, Lin, you see that the gold amalgam never left camp on the backs of Joyce's mules. It was the spurious amalgam that I sent, together with the balls of clay and scrap iron."

"I knew that all along," said Lin, dragging the second bag to the rim of the cavity. "And I tried to protect you, Agnes. I haven't told my suspicions to your brother. He will never know about this from my lips. I even went so far as to throw suspicion on his friend McDade, in order to account for my possible absence from the guard this morning. I had to make some excuse for not going along, you see.

"So, for fear that he might get an inkling that I suspected you, I led him into distrusting McDade. But he'll just think me crazy when he discovers that McDade is all right. I'll cook up some story, and in the course of it account for my fib about the news of the oil-stock slump in the papers. That was a bit crude, but I was forced to invent on the spur of the moment.

Leave Jeff to me, though. I can handle that old filibuster to the queen's taste. But why, Agnes—why did you go into partnership with Noah? And what did you mean when you said that Noah meant to bring you here to-night, so that you would know where to find the gold later?"

"I was going to let all of you believe that the gold had been stolen," she replied. "Then, knowing that it was hidden here, I was going to manufacture a big story about finding Noah Littlejohn in the woods, becoming suspicious of him, and trailing him to the hidden amalgam. I meant to conduct all of you to it, and when you thought that I had been the means of retrieving your fortunes, just when they were at the lowest ebb, I imagined that—that you would—that it would help my cause."

"But listen," he said, fishing dexterously for the third bag: "If Noah managed to double-cross Ozias and the gang, and hide the gold here, where did you come in? Didn't he intend to come out and get it himself, and beat it out of the country? And later, maybe, come back, and try to get Joyce?"

"He wanted to get Joyce, of course," was her reply. "But he didn't intend to take the gold with him. He said he couldn't handle it—that it was too risky, too bulky. So I—I—he suggested that I pay him cash for it so that he could skip the country. He'd leave the gold, he promised, for me to get later when I made my grand play, and get you and my brother out of your financial difficulties."

"You paid that bird real money, taking his word for it that he'd leave that gold here for you to get after he'd gone?"

"Ye-yes, Lin. I gave him eighty thousand dollars in bank notes last night. That composed about all of my savings, with the exception of a few thousand dol-

lars. I'd already sent for it, and Joyce brought it in by registered mail. Noah said that would be enough for him. We didn't know you were going to uncover that sixty-thousand-dollar pocket when I wrote to the bank and withdrew my savings account. Anyway, I couldn't have raised sixty thousand dollars more. I have given Noah about all the money that I have. He seemed satisfied."

"Agnes! Agnes!" wailed Lin sorrowfully. "How could you be such a sucker? Don't you realize how you were playing with fire? He has your eighty thousand dollars in cash on his person now. He means to come here as soon as he can shake Ozias and the others whom he duped, get the gold, and drift. You would have lost your eighty thousand, and we our hundred and forty thousand, too."

"I—I believed that he would play fair with me, Lin," she pleaded. "He seemed in earnest. The amalgam was useless to him, he said. For him to try to convert it into money would arouse suspicion instantly, and he'd find himself in the penitentiary before he knew it. That sounded reasonable, Lin, so I—I imagined he would not dare to try and take all that gold out of these mountains."

For a long time, as he slowly moved his hook against the bags below, Lin Columbia said nothing.

"And you were willing to—to lose all of your money—all of your savings for six years—*eighty thousand dollars!*—to make me love you?"

"Yes, Lin," she said softly. "I didn't steal anything. I thought that I was committing no crime. I was merely playing a desperate, silly game to equal Joyce in her service to you. I know I'm a fool. But I—I—Oh, Lin, love is blind, foolish, without rime or reason! I lost my head!"

"There! There!" he soothed, as she began sobbing

again. "Worse things than that have been done by folks in—I don't like to say it—in love. I'm sorry about your eighty thousand, Agnes. It's a fortune. I'm not worth it! I'm positive that Noah Littlejohn, with this big haul on hand, will give up the game and shake the gang this morning. I expect him to come at any moment—before we can get away from here with the gold, maybe. If he finds us here he will realize that he is beaten. Then he'll ride away with your money and leave the loot."

"Let him!" cried Agnes gloomily. "I don't care. I don't want money now, Lin—I don't care for anything in life."

"If we could only manage to get the gold out of here I could lay for him, hold him up, take those notes away from him, and then kick him down the mountain-side," Lin said. "Wonder if we hadn't better lie low, let him get entirely into the cave here, and then step on his head."

"All that is for you to decide," Agnes told him. "But tell me, Lin, how you came to suspect me."

"I knew that, for some mysterious reason, you were gypping us from the start," he declared. "For when we sent out the thirty thousand by Joyce, I looked into the bags and saw the fake stuff after you'd tied 'em up. I said nothing. I knew Joyce could take care of herself. I knew you were in league with some member of the gang, and thought that this person would follow the outfit and keep tab on Joyce. Noah Littlejohn attended to that. He either substituted scrap iron and clay for the fake amalgam when Joyce left it beside the trail, or switched bags on her while she slept at night. So I said nothing to you nor anybody else. I was waiting for the thing to work itself out, wondering why you would deliberately steal from us—wondering why on earth you wanted to."

"I saw you meet Noah one night and talk with him. I trailed him to his lair. At first, because you were wearing riding breeches, I thought you were a man. But in the end I decided that my first deduction was correct."

"And you ceased to even think you loved me after your discovery, didn't you, Lin?" she asked plaintively. "I've noticed a difference in your attitude toward me lately. Well, I must give you up. I've fought, lowered myself to connive with a crook, and failed. I—I deserve to fail. But, oh, Lin, I—I wanted you!"

From the entrance of the cave came the interrupting voice of Joyce Larue.

"Noah Littlejohn and Ozias Tyrone are riding down into the cañon of the Pipe-organ," she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Ah-ha!" laughed Lin. "So Noah failed to shake the black fellow, eh? And he's gone partners, fifty-fifty, with him to gyp the rest of the bunch. Maybe Ozias has tumbled to the fake amalgam, and Noah had to take him on or start an orphanage for a flock of bullets. Let 'em come, Joyce—we need 'em."

He lowered his voice and spoke again to the girl beside him.

"That means, Agnes, that Noah Littlejohn will have to make an effort to get the gold, in order to appease Ozias. He'll not tell Ozias about the eighty thousand in his pocket, which he might skip with and be satisfied if he came here alone and found us in possession. We'll get your greenbacks for you, Agnes, but we may have to fight for 'em. Hold the bridge, *mestiza*. I'll keep on fishin' the gold bags outa the pit."

CHAPTER XL

TRAPPED

AGNES continued to flash the electric torch in the pit while Lin fished for the bags of gold. Joyce Larue kept her position at the mouth of the cave to watch for the coming of Ozias Tyrone and Noah Littlejohn. Eight of the bags had been safely landed at Lin's feet before the girl voiced her second warning. An hour had passed since she sighted the rancher and his foreman riding down into the cañon of the Pipe-organ.

"I hear footsteps," the girl announced quietly. "I think they're just stepping onto the shelf that leads to this cave."

Lin dragged up another bag and, setting it at his feet, dropped the lariat beside it. He stepped to the side of Joyce and both stood listening.

"Voices," he said suddenly. "They're both coming. Let's get one on either side of the entrance and allow 'em to come entirely inside. Then we'll have 'em between us. Agnes, step over here, please. Cut off your light. Keep it dark till you hear me order them to throw up their hands, then flash it straight at them. Don't be afraid; the *mestiza* and I will have them covered. Don't hesitate to shoot, Joyce, if they don't obey my command immediately."

They took their various positions, Agnes snapping off the stream of brilliancy. As they waited they heard the strained breathing of one another, an occasional word from the approaching men, the scrape of their

feet as they made their way cautiously along the dangerous shelf.

"Lin, our horses!" suddenly whispered Joyce. "They'll have seen them."

"Maybe not. We weren't following the most direct route to the cave when we stopped them. They rode past them, perhaps fifty feet to the southeast, and the rocks would hide them."

Silence again; then, close at hand, the voice of the black-bearded cattleman boomed through the mountain quietude.

"Go on in, Noah Littlejohn," it said. "I ain't takin' no chances on ye after th' way ye laid to clean me. Your back to me, son, not mine to you. They'd never find my body here in the mountings if your gun was to go off accident'ly when my back was to ye. Go on in, Noah Littlejohn!"

"Boss," said Noah, "I'm tellin' ye I never tried to put it over on ye. That fake stuff that ye thought was amalgam was jest fer th' boys to see. I was gonta let ye into the secret all along. I never laid to skin ye, boss—honest I didn't!"

"Why didn't ye tell me what ye'd done long ago, then?" asked Ozias. "Why didn't ye let me know yer game from th' outset? No, ye can't fool me any longer, Noah Littlejohn. I don't trust ye a-tall. Go on in, and remember my two guns will be aimed at th' small o' yer back all th' time. I'll keep ye covered, too, while ye're gettin' up th' gold. Go!"

Noah did not answer this. His foot scraped on the stones once more as he apparently started forward. Then came an unexpected quick shuffling, and Black Ozias's voice rang out:

"None o' that! Hands up!"

It was patent to the tense listeners that Noah, about to enter the cave, had wheeled suddenly, and, taking

a desperate chance, had tried to draw his gun and shoot his boss. Ozias, perhaps fearing that Noah was still deceiving him, and that, if he killed him he might never learn the true whereabouts of the gold, had ordered him to throw up his hands, instead of pouring lead into his lank body.

"Ozias!" cried Noah's voice. "Don't act thataway! Be sensible. My foot jest slipped—that was all. I wasn't amin' to smoke ye up, boss!"

"Look!" cried Ozias excitedly. "What's that? What's that light shinin' there?"

Then for the first time Joyce and Lin realized what had taken place beside them. Agnes Deville, trembling from head to feet, and on the point of fainting with excitement and fear, had flashed her light the moment she heard Ozias's command, "Hands up." Over and over in her whirling thoughts she had revolved the injunction: "Press the lever when Lin says 'Hands up.' Press the lever when he says 'Hands up.'" And when she heard these words from the lips of the ranchman she had lost her head and obeyed instinctively, not realizing that it was not Lin Columbia who had spoken the command.

Lin groaned as he took in the situation. Outside Ozias and Noah Littlejohn were speaking rapidly, their suspicion of each other cast precipitately into the discard.

"Somebody's in there!" came Noah's low warning. "I—it's that there Columbia boy, I'll bet. I thought somebody was followin' me this mornin' jest about dawn, when I brung th' last o' th' gold here to hide her. And he wasn't in the fracas over on th' trail th' other side o' the river. He—"

"Shet up and le's git outa here!" growled Black Ozias. "Back up. Git aroun' th' bend o' this here shelf er he'll smoke us!"

Lin Columbia was in action. He leaped to the mouth of the cave, his six-gun advanced and ready. He caught one glimpse of Noah Littlejohn's white, peeled face as Noah, with his colorless eyes popping from his head, backed hurriedly away. Then the earth and rock crumbled beneath Lin's feet, and he would have plunged over the precipice into the boiling creek had not Joyce grabbed him and hauled him back.

A shot rang out. The bullet whistled past Lin's ears. Then the girl dragged him back to safety. He was unhurt. But Noah Littlejohn and his boss had had time to turn their backs and flee along the narrow shelf to the wider floor beyond the several bends between the end of the trail and the cave.

"A fine how-d'ye-do!" grumbled Lin, as he sprang to his feet.

"Oh, Lin!" cried Agnes, shaking like a leaf in the wind. "I'm to blame. I—I lost my senses. When I heard somebody shout 'Hands up!' I—I pressed the lever."

"Never mind," said Lin. "It can't be helped now. But Lord, if we could only have gotten 'em in here and covered 'em at the proper moment! Now it's gonta be—well, fierce, we'll say. What a mess! Mother, I've come home to die!"

"What can we do, Lin?" asked Joyce.

"I hate to think about it," he replied. "We're trapped in here like rabbits now. They know they've got us. We don't dare show our faces, or they'll have us dead to rights. There's only one way out—along that narrow shelf over which we came. They can wait at the other end and let us have it when we show up. They'll shoot to kill, too—both of 'em. They'll forget their differences and join forces against us. We've no grub, no water. We can't withstand a siege. We can't even offer to compromise with them. They wouldn't

be content with half the gold. They have only to wait and starve us out in order to hog it all. But Noah has that eighty thousand in his kick. He may decide to give Ozias the slip and beat it with that. We might handle Ozias—the three of us—at great risk, of course.”

“Lin,” said Joyce, “I’m not afraid to leap over the edge of the precipice into the pool below the cataract that’s directly under us. Let me do it, and swim to the other side and steal away through the rocks to the camp for help.”

Lin Columbia shook his head. “They’d never let you get away,” he said. “They’ll be watching for that move from the other end of the trail. They’d shoot you down before you scrambled out on the other side.”

“I’ll risk it, Lin. I’m a good swimmer. I could swim underneath the water after I dived and maybe make it. If they didn’t happen to see me in the air, they might not hear the splash I made. The noise of the waterfall would drown it. See that tall grass growing on the other side, in the water and at the edge of it? Maybe I could make my dive in line with that, swim beneath the surface and come up in it. Then I know I could sneak out and crawl away unseen.”

Lin pondered. “Sounds not altogether impossible,” he admitted. “But I’ll never allow you to try it. I’m the bird that’ll turn fish if I finally convince myself that the chances are good.”

“Listen to me,” said Agnes suddenly. “I’m the direct cause of all this trouble. I not only committed an act which brought you both here, but just now I ruined everything when I flashed the light. I can swim as well as Joyce, at least. I can dive, too. I’m the one to try to get help.”

“You’d get lost in the mountains,” Lin told her. “Couldn’t think of lettin’ either of you tackle that job.

And I'd hate to go myself and leave you alone, with Ozias and Littlejohn waiting out there like a couple of starving coyotes."

"We might remain quiet all day and make an effort to get out that way after dark," suggested Joyce.

"Now you're talkin' sense," Lin encouraged her. "We'll think that over."

Joyce Larue started to speak, then suddenly closed her lips tight. She whipped up her .38, and the action was followed by a roar that filled the little cave.

"I didn't get him," she said morosely. "I just caught a fleeting glimpse of one of them as he dodged behind a bowlder on the other side of the creek. I think it was Noah. He's crossed down below, where the wall isn't so steep, and taken up a position over there. Now our chance of getting out by way of the pool, even after dark, is far slimmer than before. Noah's directly opposite us, on a level with the cave. He can see straight in here, almost. If he has a Winchester he might even—"

"He has one," Lin interrupted. "I saw it in his camp, several miles down the river. But whether he brought it along to-day on his saddle or not—"

"Look out!" screamed Agnes; and all three jumped as the muffled report of a rifle came from across the churning waters of the cataract.

"Get back in the darker part of the cave," commanded Lin Columbia. "I heard that confounded bullet spat against the stones before the report came, but wasn't given time to realize what it was. Well, the rifleman over there, whoever he is, has somewhat the best of it. We have only six-guns. Keep low and out of the light, girls. I'm going to crawl to the edge and try to pot him if he tries another shot."

With that Lin lay prone on the rock and crawled slowly toward the entrance of the cave. He found a

good-sized stone that was loose, and rolled it into place before him. Trundling it along ahead of him, and keeping it constantly before his head and body, he moved snaillike to the entrance.

For five minutes he lay without a move. Then cautiously he stretched out his gun hand before him, around one edge of the protecting stone. Presently his head shot out. A moment or two of waiting, then the little cave seemed to burst asunder as his big forty-five spat a stream of fire across the raging torrent.

"Noah, all right," he announced. "Saw his onion-skin mug over there. I didn't nip him, I know. Guess I shot too high."

"Lin," said Joyce, "a great many of these rocks are movable. They're hanging loose in the walls of the cave. Let's get some of them out and see if we can't make a sort of breastworks in front of us. Then we can both lie behind it and maybe one of us will pot that hombre across the creek."

"Good idea," said Lin. "I suggest that you and Agnes get at it. Keep in the dark as much as possible, and roll the stones over to me. I'll try to place them with my hands and feet, and at the same time I'll be ready to wither that ostrich if he shows his face."

For half an hour the two girls worked at dislodging the stones that hung in the walls of the cave. It was slow work, for they had to be very careful and not expose themselves to the hidden marksman's fire. But finally, by deft maneuvering, Lin had managed to place two dozen or more stones, as large as the girls could handle, in a line across the cave. Now he was able to work faster and with less caution, and he wormed his way back and forth, trundling stones before him, to be piled on top of the bottom layer. A wall of stone, two feet high in places, was the result. They worked loose more of the stones now, and Lin lifted them over his

wall so that they would drop close to it on the other side. This appreciably lessened the danger of a bullet's finding its way between the wide crevices in the wall. An hour after they had begun laboring they lay side by side, each peering through one of the remaining interstices in the crude breastworks, Joyce and Lin ready to open fire on their enemy if he showed his face.

"They've got water a plenty," Lin remarked. "And if they've got grub with 'em, they won't have to go for any. They may have some provisions cached close, and Black Ozias, if he intends to guard the other end of the trail, could go for them any time he feels like it without us being any the wiser. Yes, they've got the best of it all around. We don't dare to try to slip out on Ozias. He'll be standing motionless and will hear us coming. He'll get the drop and let us have it. Only thing to do is to limit Noah's capacity for cussedness with a stray chunk of lead. Then we've got a chance to make it out by diving into the pool. Now, Noah, old swivel-eye, we're ready for you. I want you to grin at me just once!"

It seemed to the imprisoned trio that Noah had not been able to see that they were constructing a protecting wall because of the darkness of the interior of the cave. He had fired only two shots while they were at work, aiming at nothing in particular.

Two hours passed. Not a move on the other side of the creek. The three were growing nervous, and they moved about restlessly. Joyce wanted to take a chance, dart out across Noah's range of vision, and try to inveigle him into showing his face and shoulder for a shot at her, when Lin, the best marksman, might be able to do something with his six. But Lin refused to let her try it. When he proposed to do the same thing, both girls protested vehemently.

The morning dragged itself away. Agnes's wrist

watch showed them that noon had come. It was hot, outside in the rocks, they knew, but the cave was cool.

"Wonder if he had the presence of mind to pack water up with him when he gophered himself into those rocks," Lin said. "If not, that sun ought to be drivin' him down to the creek for a tongue splash."

"Perhaps he can get out on the other side and find water somewhere," suggested Joyce.

"Takin' the joy outa life again, *mestiza!*" grumbled Lin. "I'm gonta try the trick of holding out my hat right quicklike. I'll stand up and cling to one wall, where it's dark, and stick my hat straight out. Let him taste lead, if you can, Joyce, provided he falls for my stuff and tries a shot. I want to test out a theory. I think that sun has driven him out for water, over the rocks back of him. If my hat fails to draw his fire, I'm gonta make an effort to dive into the pool and sneak to camp for help. I'll leave you my gun, if I go. The two of you can hold 'em off a long time, if you know help is coming."

He wriggled back from the breastworks, rose to his feet, and crept along in the shadow of the left-hand wall, stepping over the line of stones and approaching the mouth of the cave.

"Ready, Joyce!" he announced at last. "Take your smoke iron in both hands and handle her like a rifle. Take a good aim. Wither 'im, by golly! Here goes my hat."

With that he thrust out his right hand into the bright sunlight, his hat held in his fingers. But from the other side of the creek no bullet sped on its way into the entrance of the cave.

"He's gone for water, or he failed to fall for it," said Lin, stealing back behind the breastworks. "Now, question is, did he get onto me, and is he trying to

make me think he's gone, in order to draw us out in an effort to make our get-away?"

"He's clever, cautious, thoughtful," Joyce returned. "He wouldn't cross to those rocks, I'm thinking, without remembering to take water along."

"Guess you're right. Well, we're wasting time. You hold the fort, Joyce, and Agnes and I will continue to drag up the gold till we've landed the last of it."

Agnes and he at once crawled back to the brink of the black pit, where the girl flashed her light again and Lin continued his interrupted fishing for the bags of gold.

They brought the last of them to the floor of the cave. Then for hours all three lay and watched the rocks on the other side of the cañon. The afternoon wore on. All three were hungry, and thirstier yet, but none of them would admit it. At last the evening shadows crept down from the peaks about them. Darkness came swiftly.

"Now what?" asked Lin.

"Just this!" cried Agnes in a sharp voice.

And before Joyce or Lin realized what she was about she had sprung to her feet, run swiftly to the mouth of the cave, and hung there over the black water an instant, poised for a dive.

"Agnes!" shouted Lin. "Stop! Don't!"

Then she disappeared over the edge, head first; and in the same instant, down beside the pool below the cave, an intense light burst forth and flooded the cañon with an orange glow.

CHAPTER XLI

DEEP WATERS

As Lin Columbia and Joyce Larue, regardless of consequences, leaped toward the entrance of the cave, in a futile effort to prevent Agnes Deville from diving into the black pool thirty feet below her, Lin caught an inkling of what had caused the orange glow that was flooding the grim rocks about them.

While Noah Littlejohn stood guard over the mouth of the cave, Ozias Tyrone had left his position at the end of the trail and sneaked down into the cañon to prepare for a possible nighttime attempt on the part of the prisoners to escape and go for help. It was a simple matter for him to do this, for the trapped trio had no way of seeing over the edge of the precipice without placing themselves in the line of Noah's bullets.

Believing that one of the imprisoned three might plunge into the pool when darkness came and try to get out through the hills, he had laid dry grass, kindling, and a great quantity of readily inflammable driftwood in a pile beside the pool. This was designed to light up the pool so that Noah could take a shot at anybody who essayed to dive into it and escape. He had lighted it just as Agnes made her mad leap from the rocky shelf above, and the dry grass and pitchy pine had flamed up immediately.

All this passed through Lin Columbia's mind as he darted from back of the breast-works to the mouth of the cave and out to the edge of the narrow shelf

before the opening. A rifle cracked across the cañon, but Lin paid no heed to it.

Down below he saw Ozias Tyrone running down the creek, unaware that Agnes had dived into the water just as he turned his back. Lin brought up his six-shooter and sent a bullet speeding after the fleeing rancher. Across the cañon Noah's rifle spoke again, and a bullet shattered the crumbly stone before the toes of Lin's boots. Then from the black pool below a head bobbed into sight, and Lin caught a fleeting glimpse of Agnes as she swam desperately for the other shore.

Lin heard the panting of Joyce Larue beside him.

"Get back!" he cried. "You can do no good! You'll—"

Again Noah's rifle rang out across the chasm.

Down below the huge bonfire blazed up speedily, lighting both walls of the cañon and the surface of the deep pool. There came another shot from the other side, and Lin saw a bullet clip its way into the water close to the bobbing head. He could not see Noah because the glow from the fire failed to reach the shadow of his elevated perch. So he sent another bullet after Black Ozias. The rancher apparently realized, then, that he was hearing the reports of two weapons. He stopped, turned about, and stood gazing up the creek. Lin fired again. Ozias took in the situation. He saw the girl swimming frantically across the pool, saw her dive under the surface of the water for protection. Then he started running back in her direction.

Up came Lin's revolver. In both hands he held it, aiming deliberately at Tyrone's broad breast. The target was a poor one, moving as it was, and made uncertain by the shimmering glow of the fire that fought with the shadows of the cañon. Lin pressed the

trigger. Ozias Tyrone leaped backward, spun about, fell sidewise on the rocks beneath him.

Then there came a cruel stab of pain somewhere in Lin's body, just where he could not tell. Noah's Winchester had spoken again. Lin staggered against one wall of the cave, caught himself. Down below Black Ozias had struggled to his feet, and now was running crazily toward the pool and Agnes.

"Are you hit, Lin?" came the agonized voice of Joyce, ringing strangely in his ears as if she had called to him from afar.

He stood erect, shook off his threatening stupor, saw Ozias nearing the pool and the swimming girl, just scrambling through the grass at the water's edge. Gun in hand, not stopping to consider whether or not he was acting wisely, Lin thrust both arms before him and leaped toward the black water below.

His extended hands clove the surface. He went down and down into the icy depths of the pool. The cold revived his senses. He turned his head upward, swam frantically toward the top. His head burst through. Gasping for breath, he shook the water from his eyes, tried to see what was taking place about him. He saw Ozias, swaying from side to side, his white teeth gleaming through his ebony beard, aiming a six-shooter directly at his head.

Lin dived as the ranchman's forty-five belched lead and orange fire. He swam under the water, believing that Ozias had missed him, but so filled with pain from his first wound that he could not be sure. He swam toward the spot where he had seen Agnes clambering from the water. He believed that she was out of Noah Littlejohn's range—that overhanging rocks on that side of the pool protected her.

Black Ozias was hard hit, he knew. His aim would be poor. He had been reeling about when he fired at

Lin, fighting unconsciousness with every atom of his dogged nature. If Lin could swim below the surface until he was under the overhang of rocks with Agnes, they might have a chance. He would drag her back into the pool. Noah could not reach them with his bullets if they kept close to his side. Ozias was failing fast. Lin could hold the girl and force her under the water if Ozias rallied and attempted to shoot. But Joyce! Where was Joyce? What was she doing? Was she still up there before the mouth of the cave, a target for Noah's Winchester?

His lungs were bursting, it seemed. But he summoned all of his powers of endurance and struggled on toward Agnes. His head bumped into something hard. He had reached the other side and struck an underwater stone.

He thrust his face above the surface of the pool, gasped desperately for air. Dashing the water from his eyes, he saw Agnes trying to crawl over a big rock.

"Agnes!" he called. "Get back into the water, quick! It's your only protection!"

She did not heed him, seemed not to have heard. Lin shot a side glance at Ozias.

The black-bearded ranchman had crumpled to the ground and lay there motionless, one hand stretched out and flapping idly in a riffle of the stream.

A shrill cry behind Lin brought him about in consternation. He saw another head bobbing toward him in the pool.

Joyce Larue had dived after him.

From the rocks above Noah Littlejohn's Winchester roared its deadly battle cry. In the flickering light that made daggers of fire on the water, Lin saw the disturbance that the bullet had caused, not six inches from Joyce's head.

"Dive!" he shouted.

The girl's head went under instantly, as another bullet chugged beside it and the rifle roared above.

"We'll make it! We'll make it yet!" Lin shouted encouragingly to Agnes, still struggling insanely to top the waterworn boulder before her.

Then came a tremendous splash, and Lin realized that Noah Littlejohn, sensing that Joyce, too, would swim beneath the water and get under the protection of the frowning rocks, had run down from his hiding-place and leaped into the pool in a crazy, desperate, final effort to turn defeat to victory.

Noah Littlejohn was a fighter, and Lin Columbia knew it. A fortune was at stake, and he had worked hard and craftily to win it. The thought of losing it now had driven him almost insane with rage, and he had thrown all reason to the winds and leaped into the very arms of his enemies.

But he knew that Lin was wounded. He could not have missed seeing him stagger against the wall of the cave before he dived. The chances were many to one, he perhaps had reasoned, that, when he leaped into the water, he would have only two girls to deal with. All this flashed through Lin Columbia's mind as he waited, swaying from side to side with pain and sickness, for Noah's head to cleave the surface after his plunge. Lin's gun was wet, but he was ready to take a chance on its bursting in his hand and fire at Noah the moment his head appeared.

Then suddenly, from an unexpected part of the pool, there came an agonized scream. Two heads shot out of the water—Noah Littlejohn's and Joyce's. Noah had the girl in his arms. For the fraction of a moment the weird orange light of the fire played over his cruel features. Lin dared not shoot, with the girl's head so close to his.

"Lin! Lin!" Joyce screamed. Then followed a

gurgling cry as Noah thrust her head under the water.

Then Lin Columbia leaped back, his gun still in his hand, and swam with long strokes toward the grinning, ghost-white face that gleamed just above the black surface of the pool.

It disappeared as the struggling girl beneath the water pulled the head of her tormentor down.

But it again came to the top instantly, while Joyce's still remained below the surface. Lin Columbia belted with rage as he swam on and on, for miles it seemed, with the hideous, peeled-looking face always gliding away from him. Then, almost before he was aware of it, his arms were about Noah Littlejohn, and the most desperate battle of his life was on.

They hammered at each other with their revolvers. In his insane desire to kill this man, Lin had forgotten Joyce. The pain in his body seemed to have driven all reason from his mind, and he was filled only with hatred and the desire to slay.

Underneath the water came an odd-sounding explosion—muffled, weird. Lin knew instinctively that Noah, unable to get his six-shooter above the surface, had pressed the trigger of it where it was. Lin Columbia felt no new pain, and laughed as the water boiled about him from the explosion and the smoke rose grotesquely and was whisked away. He had grabbed Noah's wrist—the wrist of the hand that held the six-gun. He had not fully realized that till after the shot. His twisting and bending of Noah's wrist and arm had probably saved his life.

He could not get his own revolver in action. He and Noah were struggling desperately, their heads bobbing up and down, now one of them submerged, and now the other. They wrestled as if they were on dry land, but there was no footing beneath them, for the pool was deep.

Down they went to the rocky bottom, hammering ineffectually through the interfering water, clawing at each other's eyes, kicking, trying in vain to use their weapons. Something warned Lin not to fire his six-shooter under the water. It might blow up in his hands. He was positive that, if his head were under water when he pulled the trigger, he would go stone-deaf for the remainder of his days.

He had been down a long time, he remembered suddenly. His lungs were bursting. Where was Noah Littlejohn? Had he lost the sense of feeling? Was he holding Noah under the water, too?

He must get his head above the water and breathe. With a desperate effort he shook off something that was clinging to him in the chilling depths—whether it was Noah or not he could not tell—and fairly climbed toward the blessed air above.

His head shot through. Noah's face grinned directly into his. The smeared bloodhound eyes, with the irritated inside of their sagging underlids exposed, frenzied him. With a cry of torment he loosed his gun, grabbed Noah's wispy hair with the hand that had held the weapon, and thrust the goblinlike face under water again. Lin's left hand still twisted Noah's wrist at the level of his waist.

Then came a repetition of that strange under-water explosion. The water boiled about him, surged over his face, half strangled him. But a great weight had left him suddenly. He was free. He gulped in the life-giving air, then heard a voice in his ears—the voice of Joyce Larue. Arms went about him. His senses left him entirely, and it seemed sweet to sleep.

He regained consciousness near the water's edge, where Joyce had dragged him, where she and Agnes had bent over him and stanchd the flow from his wound.

"Noah Littlejohn!" he cried, trying to rise.

"There he lies," said the girl with the hazel eyes as she bent over him. "He's terribly shocked, I think, from the explosion of his own gun under water. He was conscious a little while ago, but when I spoke to him he seemed not to hear. I think he's deaf, Lin. His head was under water when he fired; yours wasn't. I guess his gun exploded in his hand. He's shaking like a leaf. And, Lin, I've been up to where he was hiding. I found a fortune there in the rocks, in new thousand-dollar bills. But sleep now, Lin—your wound isn't serious. Agnes rode to camp for help hours ago. You've been unconscious almost all night. Dawn is just at hand. Listen! I hear the tramp of horses now. There's Jeffrey's shout. Rest, Lin, dear—everything's all right now."

"All right," agreed Lin weakly, "if—if you'll kiss me."

She kissed him then, and her hot tears fell on his face. After a minute he opened his blue eyes and said, as he smiled up at her:

"The mine, Joyce. I've just named it. I've been so busy that I forgot. Funny, isn't it? But to myself I've called it the Mestiza Mine since the day I met you at Tyrone Ranch. 'Mestiza Mine,'" he added, laughing childishly. "Do you get it? Funny, isn't it? '*Mestiza mine*'—don't capitalize the M in 'mine.' *Mestiza mine*—get me?"

"I get you, gringo," she said, and stooped and kissed him again.



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